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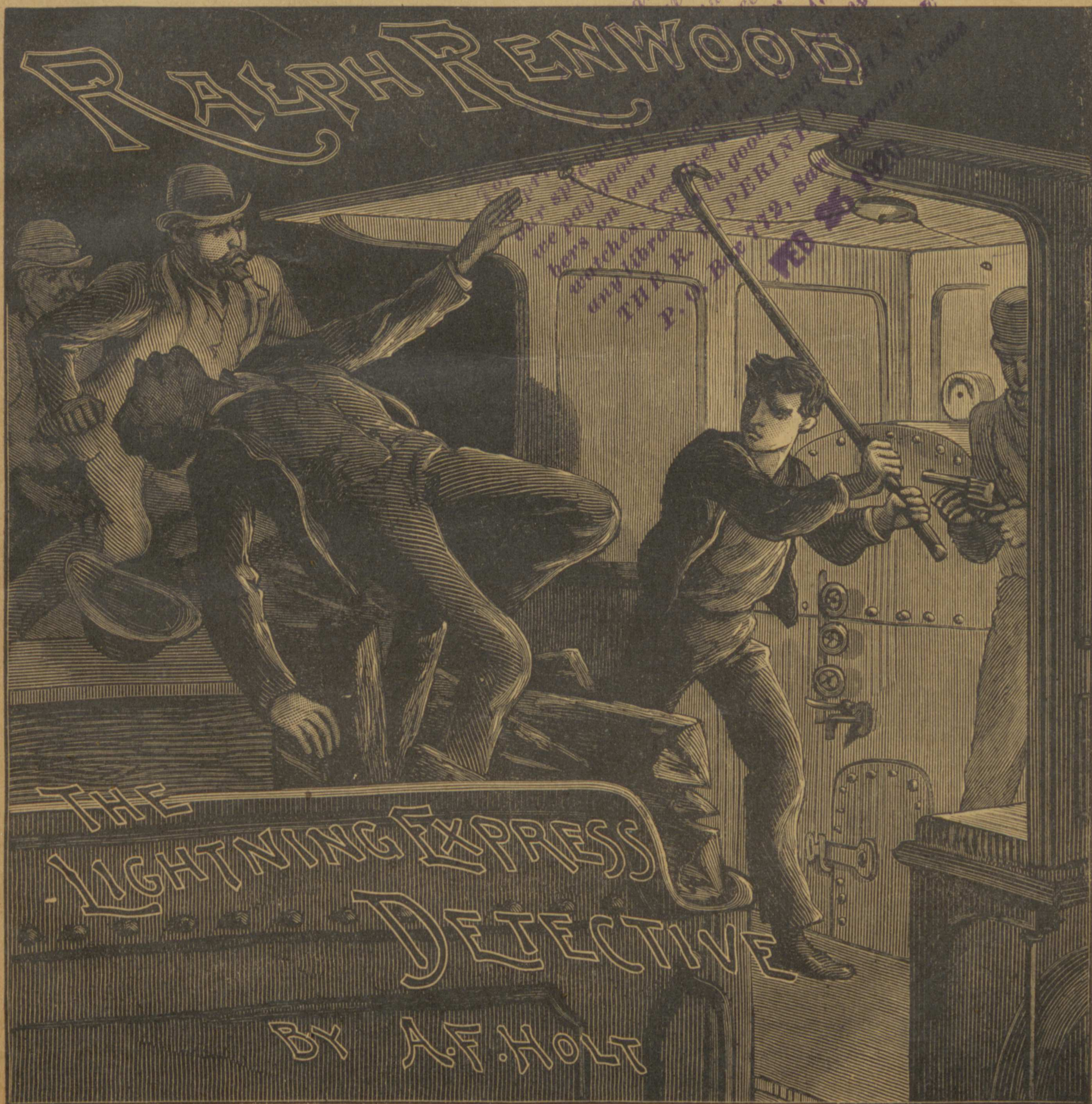
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THE FOREMOST BANDIT, WHO HAPPENED TO BE JUST WITHIN RANGE, CAUGHT THE IRON BAR FULL ON THE NECK.

Ralph Renwood,

The Lightning Express Detective;

OR,

BLACK BART'S DEATH RUN.

A Romance of the Rail.

BY A. F. HOLT.

CHAPTER I.

HOMEWARD BOUND.

A PASSENGER-TRAIN was flying over the irons at almost lightning-speed; and high above the whirr of wheels rose the voice of a singer, out-ringing bold and clear:

"Toot—toot! Ding—dong!
Swift as the whirlwind we thunder along,
Flying past lakelets and sparkling rills,
Plunging through tunnels in towering hills;
Rattling o'er bridges, rushing through dales,
Waking the echoes of slumbering vales;
Puffing and snorting o'er meadow and plain,
Our glittering iron horse draws the long train.
Clashing, crashing,
Wildly dashing,
Light as a fiery meteor flashing!

"Pulses throbbing and hearts filled with glee,
Madly we dash on our wild career;
Monarchs of all we survey are we—
Hurrah for the life of the bold engineer!"

A mere lad was the songster, certainly not over seventeen. He was tall and slender, and straight as an arrow. His merry blue eyes sparkled like twin stars.

Bold and picturesque he looked, in the weird, uncertain light, standing erect upon the floor of the cab, his slender form swaying from side to side with the motion of the swiftly-speeding iron horse. Intense enthusiasm lighted every feature as, in a clear, boyish tone, he sung those stirring words.

"Them's my sentiments exactly! This is jest ge-lorious! Jee-whizz! How we are hummin'. Hooray! for an engineer's life, say I!"

Unable to do his feelings justice by words alone, the lad essayed to dance a break-down, but with disastrous results; for just then a sudden plunge of the locomotive around a sharp curve in the track caused the would-be dancer to lose his equilibrium, and roll over and over upon the floor.

At this unexpected ending to the boy's demonstrations the man upon the engineer's seat turned his head for a moment, an amused smile upon his lips.

He was a young fellow, not more than twenty-three, straight and tall, with wavy brown hair, and eyes that flashed keen as the mountain eagle's.

Remarkably young for such a responsible position, yet Ralph Renwood possessed all the essential qualities of a model engineer, being brave, steady and reliable; and doubtless the railroad officials knew what they were about, when they intrusted to him the guidance of the Lightning Mail and Express.

The young engineer looked with amusement upon the antics of his irrepressible companion.

"Careful, Harry!" he cautioned. "Pray exercise a little more judgment, or I fear you will go 'crashing, clashing' into the ditch."

His ardor somewhat dampened, the boy slowly pulled himself together, ruefully rubbing the back of his head, which had come into violent contact with the oaken floor.

"Never mind, Harry. It's all in a lifetime. You must expect many a hard knock, my lad, before you become a full-fledged knight of the lever."

Harry Hilton was a typical American boy, filled to the brim with life and spirit. Like many others of his age, the adventurous life of the railroad man had for him a strange fascination, and the height of his ambition was to stand at the throttle of a locomotive.

The lad was a universal favorite in his native town, and particularly so among the railroad "boys." One of them, on account of the youth's well-known hobby, also in allusion to his brilliant hair, had dubbed him Headlight Harry, a cognomen which stuck to him like wax.

"I don't wish to influence you to turn from a course upon which I see you are determined," said the young engineer, as the train rolled along. "Live and learn," says the motto; and experience will teach you that the life of an engineer is a thorny one.

"Think of the danger! A broken rail, a wash-out, a misplaced switch—countless things, either the result of accident or carelessness, he must be ever ready to avoid. He stands at

his post, with the possibility of being hurled into eternity the next moment.

"An engineer must be faithful, cool and vigilant, with active brain and nerves of steel. The passengers look to him for safety; their lives are in his hands. He must be prepared to run extra hours—foodless, sleepless and without a thought for his own comfort. In fact, he should be little short of superhuman—a veritable automaton—for the benefit of the public."

"All this danger and inconvenience is incurred for a meager salary; and if, perchance, Fate gains the mastery and the engineer goes down with his machine, standing heroically at his post in the effort to save the lives of others, when a sudden leap might have preserved his own, people turn carelessly away from the mangled remains, with the remark, 'Only the engineer!'"

"Believe me, Harry, it's a rough life at best; and it will soon wear out a constitution of iron."

Headlight Harry, in blank astonishment, listened to the speech of his companion.

"Wal, I didn't expect to hear *you* talk that way, Ralph," he ejaculated. "Skin me if I don't believe you've gone clean plumb crazy! I'd be ashamed to run down my own calling. If an engineer's life is such an all-fired hard one, what are *you* doin' here on the Atalanta, sa-ay?"

"Necessity, not choice, keeps me here. My father was an engineer—a better man never crossed the foot-boards; and it was he who taught me how to drive a locomotive. So when he died, leaving me at an early age to earn my own livelihood, I naturally chose the calling of which I was master."

"Wal, it's my opinion, Ralph, there's better things in store for you," announced Headlight Harry, with the air of an oracle. "Unless I'm greatly mistaken, there'll be a job for the parson, afore long; an', of course, Millionaire Garland, with all his rocks, wouldn't allow his son-in-law to continue runnin' an engine, rigged up in greasy overalls an' a jumper. Eh, old pard?"

The young engineer made no reply, but the faint blush that suffused his cheek, told that the boy's shot had not come far from the mark.

"There is still another danger that menaces the railroad man, particularly in the less thickly settled regions," continued Renwood, after a pause. "There are in existence bands of train-robbers—unscrupulous cut-throats, who would not hesitate to ditch a train and send scores of souls into eternity, if there was any booty to be gained by the operation."

"This road has not escaped their depredations, as you are well aware. Nobody has forgotten the dread Black Brotherhood, whose daring exploits, only a year ago, created a reign of terror all along the line. Before their bloody record, the dark deeds of the notorious James boys pale into insignificance."

"But those days are now passed," declared Headlight Harry, positively. "Nothing has been seen of Black Bart or his men since the scrimmage at Brown's Bend, when the Vigilantes attacked them, an' put them to flight. General opinion says that the Brotherhood is clean busted, an' 'll never be heard from again."

"Possibly so; but I doubt it. Black Bart has more lives than a cat, and is always appearing when least expected. It's dollars to doughnuts, the scoundrel is still laying low in the vicinity, awaiting a favorable opportunity to spring some infernal scheme upon the public."

Headlight Harry laughed derisively.

"Well, I guess there's no danger of being molested by the Brotherhood to-night, so I sha'n't worry myself about it," he said, carelessly.

There was a serious expression upon the face of the young engineer, as he gazed fixedly out through the narrow window, to where the lurid gleam of the great headlight fell upon the glittering rails.

"I trust nothing will happen; yet, truth to tell, I feel unaccountably nervous to-night," he said, gravely. "I know the road-agents have let this vicinity severely alone for some time past; but that is no sign they always will. Besides, there are extra inducements for attack offered by this particular train."

"How so?"

"Yonder Express car contains a cool hundred thousand dollars—solid gold bars, smelted at Bullion City, and consigned to the National Bank at Richville."

"A hundred thousand dollars? Whew!" and Headlight Harry's eyes protruded like peeled onions.

"Of course, no one is to know of this consignment, save the parties most particularly con-

cerned, including the messenger and myself. However, Black Bart is a very bloodhound for nosing out such secrets; and, once aware of its valuable contents, would spare no pains to capture the train."

"Little danger, I reckon; but if Black Bart should come, we're all ready to receive him. It'll be the toughest job he ever tackled!" declared Harry, assuming a defiant attitude.

"Nevertheless, I shall not breathe free again, until the gold is out of my charge, and safe in the vaults at Richville—*Hark!*"

The bell-cord suddenly tightened, then slackened perceptibly, as a single sonorous clang of the engine-bell pealed warningly upon their ears, while at the same time the Atalanta lurched forward at increased speed, as if suddenly released from a heavy burden.

With a cry of alarm, Renwood sprang to grasp the throttle.

"Great Heaven!" he exclaimed. "The train has parted!"

CHAPTER II.

BLACK BART.

"ALL aboard!"

The conductor impatiently swung his lantern, the engine groaned and labored, and the waiting passenger who had signaled the Express at the lonely station of Cross-Cut, had barely time to scramble upon the platform, ere the train rushed off into the darkness again.

There was nothing particularly noteworthy in the appearance of the new-comer, who, nodding carelessly to the surly official, leisurely made his way into the smoking-car.

He was, apparently, a middle-aged man, of medium height, broad-shouldered and muscular, with long, sandy hair, and beard that fell upon his breast, while from under shaggy brows a pair of dark eyes flashed with wondrous brilliancy. A very ordinary man, unostentatiously attired, wearing the appearance of a quiet, hard-working countryman. He carried in one hand a heavy valise, while the other grasped a cane; and there was a perceptible limp in his gait as he entered the car.

The smoking-car was filled by the miscellaneous gathering always to be found within this thoroughly American institution. Tourists, commercial travelers, sports, laborers—good, bad and indifferent, had congregated with one common purpose in view, and the fumes of the rankest "nigger-head" mingled with the fragrance of the choicest Havana. The card-tables, too, were receiving their customary share of attention, and every one seemed happy and contented, from the haughty Britisher, "doing this blawsted country, don'tcher know," down to the ragged, impecunious tramp, who had snugly ensconced himself in the wood-box, and was now philosophically figuring out his chances of escaping the observation of the argus-eyed ticket-puncher.

Every seat was occupied, and the late arrival from Cross-Cut looked anxiously about for a place in which to deposit his hundred and fifty odd pounds of flesh, bone and muscle.

Near the middle of the car lounged a commercial drummer, who, with more cheek than courtesy, had appropriated two entire seats to accommodate himself and a multitudinous array of boxes, bundles and budgets. He was a swell young fellow, faultlessly attired, and lolled with his feet cocked upon the top of a pile of sample-cases, puffing serenely at a fragrant weed, in utter disregard of the discomfort of his fellow-passengers.

But the man from Cross-Cut espied this "pig in pantaloon," and immediately a portion of the drummer's possessions found themselves upon the floor, while the stranger, without further ceremony, dropped into the vacant place with a sigh of satisfaction.

The youth whose luggage had undergone such careless treatment was so affected by the fellow's effrontery that for a moment he could only glare at the intruder in open-mouthed amazement.

"Aw—my dear sir, it seems to me you take considerable liberty with another man's property," he finally managed to utter. "Are you aware, my Christian friend, that this seat is engaged?"

The new-comer beamed pleasantly upon his irate *vis-à-vis*, and calmly proceeded to make himself more comfortable ere deigning a response.

"Pray don't let your angry passions rise," he said, tersely. "Man was made before boxes and bundles, an' consequently has a better right to a sit. You'll allow that the floor is perfectly good enough for these traps. Don't be a hog, young feller!"

The drummer saw at a glance that the new passenger was not to be trifled with. Discretion mastered his anger, and the cloud upon his brow cleared away instantly, as he leaned forward with outstretched hand.

"I admire your cheek," he admitted, candidly. "I was laboring under the delusion that I was the brassiest man in existence, but now I shall have to take a back seat. If you ain't a drummer, you ought to be. Shake, stranger!"

A complacent smile played about the bearded lips of the man from Cross-Cut, as he noticed the complete change in the manner of the erstwhile belligerent dandy; but he accepted the proffered hand, and shook it until the owner winced.

"Glad you happened along, stranger," said the drummer. "Deuced tiresome this traveling alone, with no one to talk with. You seem to be the right sort, stranger. Have a weed?"

"Thanks!"

"Genuine article, those—three for a dollar. Expensive? Well, rather; but, you see, we always manage to work our wine and cigar bill into our regular expense account, so the house pays for all our little luxuries, and is none the wiser."

Dame Nature had endowed the commercial traveler with a liberal bump of self-conceit. He was one of the prevalent class who "know it all," and never missed an opportunity to impress his hearers with that belief. Consequently, as his companion seemed to be a man of intelligence, the dandy felt that the chance was too good to lose, and so launched forth a ceaseless stream of "gab."

The man from Cross-Cut was terse and reserved, but he listened attentively to the other's garrulous discourse, and, not to be outdone in politeness, made frequent journeys to an inside pocket, bringing forth each time a mysterious bottle of "something," the taste of which gave the drummer great satisfaction.

"Lonesome region, this," remarked the traveler, after a cursory glance from the window. "Reminds me of—yes, by Jove! it is the very place where I had such an adventure, over a year ago. I say, stranger, have you ever heard of Black Bart's Brotherhood?"

"Black who's what?"

"Black Bart's Brotherhood—a band of train-robbers. They had a stronghold in the mountains, nobody knows just where, and used to make things interesting for travelers all along the line."

The red-haired man shook his head positively. "Never heard of them before. Never was within a thousand miles of here until yesterday, and so have had no chance to get acquainted with the local celebrities."

"Well, I know Black Bart from experience, and I tell you he is a la-la! The fellow always pops up where he is least expected; and when he gets through with a train, there generally isn't enough cash left in the crowd to buy a bunch of matches. However, I hoodwinked the scoundrel completely one day; and I claim the honor of being the only man who has succeeded in doing it."

"You?"

"Yes; and a clever dodge it was. I carried a small fortune safely from under Black Bart's very nose. Light another weed, while I give you the story."

And while his listener hastened to light the proffered cigar, the garrulous youth proceeded to unwind himself.

"You see, my business brings me into this region considerably, and several times I had suffered at the hands of this scoundrel, who had a habit of showing up with the regularity of clock-work, whenever I was aboard. Finally, I began to grow tired of the thing—particularly so, as most of the stolen money belonged to the firm, and they, suspecting that I was not on the square, finally declared that the next time it occurred I must make good the losses."

"This stirred me up, you see; and I immediately set my wits at work to devise some means of circumventing this audacious road-robber, with such good effect that a contrivance was soon evolved, the merits of which I was eager to test. The opportunity was not long coming, for, soon after, I was again sent over the line; and this time I was perfectly willing, even anxious, to meet Black Bart. Nor was I disappointed, for presently there was a commotion, as a crowd of cut-throats thronged into the car, with the redoubtable chief at their head, natural as life."

"Black Bart smiled triumphantly as he singled me out, for he doubtless remembered with pleasure the fat haul he obtained from me

the last time we met; but his feelings were doomed to undergo a sudden transformation, for a thorough search of my person brought to light only a plated chain, a jack-knife, a corkscrew, fifty cents in change, and a bottle—empty. Yet, stranger, the fact remains that a cool thousand dollars was at that moment in my possession, and it ran the gantlet of Black Bart's keen eyes, unnoticed."

"If ever a man had dust thrown in his eyes, then the redoubtable king of train-robbers is the individual; and to me belongs the distinction of having completely hoodwinked him. Ha, ha!"

And the self-satisfied drummer threw himself back in his seat, laughing loud and loud at the remembrance of his own adroitness; while the man from Cross-Cut, who had been an attentive listener, rightly conjectured that such a windy discourse had left the orator thirsty, and cordially extended his flask, which, it is needless to say, was promptly accepted.

"It must, indeed, have been an ingenious device, to baffle such a sharp fellow as this train-robber is said to be," allowed the red-haired man. "If I am permitted to ask, how did you accomplish such wonders?"

The commercial traveler drew himself up, closed one eye, and leered knowingly at his questioner.

"That, sir, is a profound secret," he said, thickly, for the stranger's liquid fire was fast affecting the by no means strong head of the drummer.

The bearded man leaned eagerly forward.

"Tell you what I'll do, friend," he said, seriously. "I am a traveling man myself, and often carry large sums of money with me. Your mysterious contrivance, if what you say is true, would be just the thing for my needs. Say, I'll give you ten dollars for the secret!"

"What? Ten dollars for my wonderful wealth-protector, warranted to deceive the sharpest thief in existence! Do you think I would barter the offspring of my fertile brain for the paltry sum of ten dollars? Never, sir! Make it twenty!"

The man from Cross-Cut appeared to hesitate.

"Twenty dollars is considerable, but I'll give it," he said, at length. "Here you are! And now for the wonderful secret!"

The drummer snapped up the greasy XX and critically examined it to see if it was genuine.

"Oh, it's a simple thing, once revealed," he explained. "Observe these shoes! 'Very ordinary pair,' you say, 'just like any shoes.' There's where you are mistaken. The heels are hollow, and may be removed or attached at pleasure, by means of a hidden spring. These receptacles, ingeniously contrived within the apparently solid heel, form an excellent hiding-place for whatever valuables may be contained in such a small compass, and a man, by simply changing his money into bills of large denominations, might safely carry a small million about him."

"That's the whole scheme in a nutshell, stranger. A simple device, but nevertheless effective. Don't you think the scheme is well worth the twenty?"

"Dirt cheap at the price," allowed the red-haired man, rubbing his hands softly, while his dark orbs twinkled with satisfaction. "Young man, you are a genius! No wonder you can laugh in the faces of Black Bart's Brotherhood!"

"And now, as I have purchased your secret, I suppose you have no objection to showing me how the device is manipulated."

"Not in the least," hastily replied the over-confident drummer.

Leaning forward, he touched one heel, which instantly became detached, revealing a cavity crammed with a wad of Uncle Sam's promises to pay.

"All done by a simple twist of the wrist. It's as plain as the nose on your face, and—"

As he looked up, the drummer paused abruptly, and the self-satisfied smile gave way to a look of blank astonishment, for a metamorphosis had taken place, complete as it was startling!

The man from Cross-Cut suddenly straightened up, until he seemed at least a foot taller; his cane was thrown aside, red wig and beard followed, revealing a dark, swarthy face, fairly devilish in its expression.

Into each hand of the metamorphosed passenger leaped a glittering six-shooter, one of which pressed the temple of the terrified drummer!

"Holy smoke!" gasped the latter, feebly.

"What on earth does this mean?"

"It means that you've made a cursed fool of

yourself, young feller. Up with your hands, quick, for I'm here on business, and my name is Black Bart!"

CHAPTER III.

THE BROTHERHOOD AT WORK.

As the stern, commanding voice of the self-announced king of train-robbers rung through the car with startling distinctness, every man started as if he had received an electric shock. Scarcely one but knew the notorious bandit by reputation, while many from personal experience were aware of his plundering proclivities.

In mingled fear and indignation the passengers heard the outlaw's grim announcement, determined to offer desperate resistance in defense of their property; but not a weapon was drawn, for just then another movement took place that was entirely unexpected.

The two rear seats were occupied by a party of rough-looking fellows, apparently backwoodsmen, who were engaged in a quiet game of eucher; but now, at the bold words of Black Bart, these men leaped to their feet, while cards were dropped, and in their places gleaming six-shooters frowned upon the other occupants of the car.

Like lightning was this move executed, and so, before the luckless passengers could offer even a show of resistance, they found themselves covered by the deadly weapons of Black Bart's satellites.

Standing like a statue in the center of the car the redoubtable chief viewed with malicious triumph the result of his strategy.

"Quite a surprise-party, eh, gentlemen?" he laughed. "Well, it's the unexpected that always happens. Now, gentlemen, be so kind as to elevate your hands while I take up my customary collection. Try to appear as cheerful as possible, and remember that the man who offers resistance gets a double dose of lead."

Hemmed in on all sides by a threatening array of weapons the unfortunate passengers had no alternative but to obey, and the trembling, wavering line of hands that instantly pointed heavenward was a ludicrous sight to see.

Even the conductor, at that moment entering the car, gazed meditatively for an instant into a frowning tube, then promptly elevated his hands.

The coolest person in the car was the ragged tramp, who rejoiced that his pockets contained nothing but holes, and consequently had no reason to fear the train-robbers. Acknowledging, in this case, the advantage of poverty, he philosophically viewed the scene from his point of vantage, ready to dodge out of harm's way if the bullets began to fly.

The bandits lost no time in useless dallying. Two of them proceeded to "go through" their victims with lightninglike rapidity, appropriating everything of value, while the others stood guard with ready weapons.

Black Bart devoted himself to the drummer, whose confidence he had so cleverly gained. Off came the wonderful boots, the valuable contents of which were speedily transferred to the capacious pocket of the outlaw. Then, with a mocking laugh, he sent the boots flying through the window.

"A good return for my twenty dollars," chuckled Bart. "Now, good-by, young man. Don't get down-hearted; but when you have any more wonderful inventions, don't fail to confide the secret to me. Ha, ha!"

The luckless man of samples, now frightened into a state of perfect sobriety, could only sink limply back into his seat, the most crestfallen being imaginable.

At this moment the rear door was thrown open, and in rushed several fellows, whose rough attire and bristling weapons stamped them as more of the Brotherhood.

"Well?" interrogated the chief, impatiently. "All right, cap'n. We cleaned the other car out, slicker'n a whistle. Not a copper left in the hull crowd."

"Good! Now, boys, for the other game. Too much time has been already wasted here. Live-ly, my men!"

As Bart spoke, he darted to the door, with the band close at his heels. Several of them retreated backward, still keeping the passengers covered, until the door was reached.

Then, when the last man had disappeared, and the deadly weapons no longer threatened them with death, the infuriated passengers arose, *en masse*, and rushed out upon the platform.

However, Bart had anticipated such a move. He was too sharp to leave his retreat uncovered. The Brotherhood worked with a machine-like

regularity and precision, that showed the details of the plan had been arranged beforehand.

The chief led the way to the platform of the Mail-and-Express car, which was next ahead of the smoker, while two of his followers hastened to detach the couplings, and thus leave the passenger-cars behind.

So rapidly did they work, that when the occupants of the smoker rushed to the door, it was to find themselves left fifty yards behind, with the engine and Express car rapidly receding in the distance. The grade at this point was remarkably heavy, and, deprived of the services of the locomotive, the speed of the detached cars lessened perceptibly with every passing moment.

Meanwhile, the train-robber chief, pausing only to note the success of his men, had thrown himself against the door of the Express car. It was locked; but gave way before Bart's massive frame, and the leader rushed into the car, only to recoil with a cry of dismay.

At the furthest end of the compartment, in front of a massive safe, stood the Express messenger. He was in the act of opening the safe when the assault came. The ponderous outer door was swung open, and the messenger, keys in hand, stood ready to unlock the inner door.

Just then the racket outside reached his ears, warning him of danger. Like a flash, the messenger's trusty revolver leaped into his hand, and, as the door flew open he fired shot after shot at the robber chief.

Crack!—crack!—crack! Bullets flew like hail about the outlaw's ears. One plowed a bloody furrow in his cheek; another clipped a lock from his swarthy brow, then buried itself in the shoulder of a brawny ruffian beyond.

Then Bart recovered himself, and with an angry snarl leaped forward like a wounded tiger. His own trusty shooter spoke spitefully, and the brave messenger fell prone upon the floor, shot through the breast.

With an inarticulate cry of triumph the robber chief bounded forward. The inner door of the safe was locked, but he caught the gleam of steel in the hand of the stricken man, and eagerly bent to seize the precious keys.

But the gallant messenger still had a vital spark left. Brave and faithful to the last, he raised himself with a supreme effort, and with his last departing strength, hurled the bunch of keys far out through the open window.

It was his last effort, for blood gushed from the poor fellow's mouth and nose, and he fell back, dead.

But the keys were irretrievably lost, and the scheme of the Brotherhood temporarily frustrated.

Knowing every foot of the road, Black Bart had no difficulty in locating their whereabouts. The train had reached the top of the heavy grade, and was now plunging swiftly down into the valley where nestled cosy Richville. Soon this stopping-place would be reached; and the robber saw that only prompt and energetic action could save his scheme from defeat.

"Out with your tools, boys!" he yelled. "Drills, hammers and plenty of powder! The bullion shall be mine, if I have to blow the whole train to kingdom come. Work lively, for there's not a second to lose."

The outlaws went to work with a will to blow off the safe-door, while their commander paced up and down the car like a caged lion, impatiently directing their movements.

"Blazes! This will never do! The train must be stopped at once, or we will run our precious necks into the hangman's noose."

"Shall we detach the car, cap'n?"

"No, you idiot! The road is steeper than Jacob's ladder, and all the brakes in Christendom couldn't hold us on this infernal grade. The only thing that remains is to take the engine."

"You, Long Pete, hail the engineer. Order him to stop the train, and if he refuses, riddle him with lead."

"Ay, cap'n!"

A tall, lanky outlaw hurried from the car, to appear upon the front platform, revolver in hand.

"Hello, there, engineer! Reverse your engine and stop the train, or off goes your head!"

This was the peremptory summons that reached the ears of the two occupants of the locomotive cab; and as the young engineer turned his head, only to find himself covered by a glittering revolver, a true sense of the situation flashed upon his mind like lightning.

He realized that the outlaws were in possession of the Express car, and failing to get to the treasure, were determined to stop the train before Richville was reached. This it was Ralph Renwood's duty to prevent; yet, brave as he

was, there was no denying the fact that the robber had him nicely covered, and in the mellow firelight that illuminated the cab, the form of the engineer presented an inviting target for pistol practice.

But before Ralph could move a finger, the problem was solved in a manner quite unexpected.

Headlight Harry had entirely escaped the observation of the outlaw, whose gaze was riveted upon the engineer; and the lad was quick to improve his opportunity.

Snatching up a heavy stick of firewood, he hurled it with all his strength at the man on the platform.

The missile sped true to its aim, striking the robber upon the right arm with terrific force; and as the arm dropped useless to his side, the pistol fell from the nerveless grasp, while its contents were discharged harmlessly into the air.

"Bravo, Harry!" cried Renwood, and in a twinkling he pulled the throttle wide open.

The Atalanta bounded ahead with increased velocity, while the engineer, with a warning cry to his companion, threw himself prone upon the floor of the cab.

The precaution was well-timed, for the baffled ruffian on the platform had drawn another weapon with his uninjured hand, and now a bullet went crashing into the engine, passing the very spot where Ralph's head had been.

Headlight Harry was prompt to follow his friend's example; and now the two crouched low behind the iron water-tanks, secure from the robber's fire.

"Whew! Things are gettin' superficially interesting, I'll allow," gasped the boy, excitedly. "This is railroad life with a vengeance!"

The engineer's only response was to produce a brace of revolvers—small, delicate tools, yet capable of doing good execution in experienced hands. One of these he handed to his companion.

"You know how to use it, Harry," he said. "If you have to shoot, keep cool, and make every shot count."

"You bet!" returned the intrepid youth, as he resolutely clutched the death-dealing weapon.

Together, the two watched and waited. The baffled outlaw had gone to rejoin his comrades, and nothing could be heard save the rattle and roar of the speeding train.

"My fears are realized, you see," exclaimed Ralph. "I anticipated trouble, and it has come. The Brotherhood have taken the train, but, for some reason, don't appear to have been successful in getting at the treasure."

"Why don't they cut off the Express car, and so rob it at their leisure?"

"Black Bart knows better than to attempt it. Running at such terrific speed on a down-grade, it would be impossible to stop the car. No; their only chance is to capture the engine, and that I am determined shall not be done."

"An' I'm with you, ev'ry time. If them g-a-loots try to take the Atalanta, we'll show 'em we're mighty hard trees ter climb," declared Headlight Harry resolutely. "But, jee-whizz! How the old engine whoops 'er up! Why, we're fairly flyin'!"

Indeed, the Atalanta was running at an alarming speed. Rocking, swaying, throbbing, her headlight piercing the Stygian gloom, the beautiful machine rushed over the irons like a fire-breathing monster. Myriads of sparks drifted heavenward, and the air rung with the ceaseless pounding of the huge driving-wheels, as the engine leaped madly away, threatening each moment to jump the track, and send all on board to destruction.

But Ralph Renwood had perfect confidence in his machine, knowing the rest of the road was straight as an arrow; and he gave his attention to the movements of the robbers in the rear.

"Black Bart's efforts must be made quickly," grimly said the young engineer, "for in twenty minutes we shall be at home, providing we keep the track. Hark!"

To the defenders' ears was wafted the sound of feet clumsily climbing over the wood-pile upon the tender. The crisis was at hand!

"They are coming, Harry," warned Renwood, coolly. "Steady, my boy, and don't waste your lead!"

A dozen shadowy forms rushed into view, and the next moment the sharp rattle of pistol-shots rose above the noise of the speeding train!

CHAPTER IV.

DEFENDING THEIR TRUST.

YELLING like a pack of wildcats, the Bandit Brotherhood, with Black Bart at their head,

scrambled desperately upon the tender, determined to annihilate the brave defenders of the locomotive.

The latter, undismayed at the overwhelming odds, crouched low behind the iron tanks, one upon each side, and met the fierce assault with the steadiness of veterans.

"Crack! Crack!" Spitefully spoke the revolvers of the gallant defenders. One stalwart outlaw threw up his arms, and leaped wildly into the air; another fell back severely wounded, while the remainder came on like demons, firing a volley into the cab as they rapidly advanced.

Then Pandemonium seemed at large, as the two parties came together in a terrible struggle for possession of the locomotive. Far above the roar of the whirling train rose the shouts of the combatants, and the sharp, ceaseless crack of rapidly-exploding firearms, mingled with the crash of glass, and the buzz of deadly bullets flying through the air.

It was a trying moment for the defenders of the engine; but not for an instant did their courage fail them. Side by side they grimly faced the outlaws' scathing fusillade.

The young engineer was an expert marksman, and did good execution with his trusty weapon; while Headlight Harry, though this was his maiden battle, kept his head at the critical moment, and fired with telling effect.

Shot followed shot in swift succession, until the Brotherhood, though they still outnumbered them five to one, actually wavered before the leaden tempest.

Hope leaped high in the breast of the engineer, as his quick eye observed the discomfiture of the train-robbers.

"Give it to 'em, Harry!" he yelled. "Only a minute more, and the murderous hounds will turn tail!"

But alas! Even as he spoke, the hammer of the young man's pistol descended with an ominous click. No report followed, and the engineer thrilled with dismay, for he knew his weapon was empty.

An instant later, Headlight Harry was in the same predicament.

Loud yells of triumph pealed from the robbers' lips, as they surged forward with renewed spirit, eager to take advantage of their opponents' misfortune.

Harry, however, was equal to the occasion. At this trying moment, when all seemed lost, the lad's eyes fell upon the long, heavy poker lying upon the floor at his feet.

Grasping the ponderous utensil with both hands, the railroad boy brought it round with terrific force.

The foremost bandit, who happened to be just within range, caught the iron bar full on the neck. There followed a faint cry, together with a glimpse of a flying form, and the luckless outlaw sailed out into the gloom as though a cyclone had struck him.

Back came the ponderous poker, and the next man saw more stars than ever ventured out on an autumn night.

Bullets flew like hail about the daring boy, but it seemed as if he bore a charmed life, for not a bullet touched him, as with dauntless courage he continued to flourish his formidable weapon, to the imminent discomfiture of the Brotherhood.

Meanwhile, Ralph Renwood had taken advantage of this diversion, and rapidly reloaded his revolver, the contents of which he now hastened to pour into the fast-thinning ranks of the outlaws.

Luck was against the latter, despite their advantage in numbers; but the idea of being cheated of their anticipated plunder by two mere striplings was enough to madden them to desperation.

Black Bart, furious with rage, threw himself at the head of his dwindling band, and fought like a tiger.

"Hooray! We're home at last!"

It was the voice of Headlight Harry that rung cheerily above the sound of conflict.

Sure enough, the lights of Richville could now be seen just ahead, twinkling like fireflies in the darkness.

Black Bart saw them, too; saw that, in spite of his strenuous endeavors, the precious contents of the Express car were fated to pass into other hands than his. In his desperation he had remained on board rather longer than was conducive to safety; and now their proximity to the town warned the chief that nothing but instant flight could save him from capture and the hangman's noose.

Accordingly Black Bart reluctantly gave the signal for flight.

To leap from a flying train in safety is no easy task; but there was no alternative, and the bandit leader set the example by swinging from the tender into empty space.

Quickly his surviving men followed. For a moment the air was full of flying bodies; then all that remained upon the train of Black Bart's Brotherhood were the bleeding bodies that strewn the tender.

The conflict was over, and the victorious defenders, marvelous to relate, had not even a scratch to show for the desperate struggle.

"Thank goodness, the agony is over! Hot and heavy while it lasted, but the results are highly satisfactory," exclaimed Renwood, as he hurried to moderate the speed of the leaping, throbbing engine.

Headlight Harry, brim-full of enthusiasm, continued to wave his fire-poker vigorously.

"That's what I call fun," he cried, excitedly. "No flies on us, eh, Ralph? Reckon Black Bart has come to the conclusion that he bit off more than he could chew."

"Pulses throbbing, and hearts fill'd with glee, Madly we dash on our wild career!

Monarchs of all we survey are we;

Hurrah! for the life of the bold engineer!"

A minute later what was left of the Lightning Express train rolled into the station at Richville; and as Ralph and Harry stepped from the cab, it was to find themselves surrounded by an excited crowd, comprising most of the town's population, who had been attracted to the scene by the heavy firing.

It took but a short time for the engineer to explain matters, and then the surprise and indignation of the Richvillians knew no bounds.

After nearly a year of peace, it had become an established belief that Black Bart's Brotherhood was a thing of the past; but the daring attack upon the Express proved that the redoubtable train-robbers were once more at their old tricks.

An engine, well guarded, was sent back to recover the detached portion of the train; and a formidable party at once set out in pursuit of the outlaws.

It is hardly necessary to say that this latter expedition was unsuccessful. A wide, deep ditch ran beside the track, and into this the bandits had landed when they leaped from the flying train. One poor wretch, too badly hurt to get away, was found and captured; but the remainder, including the notorious chief, had vanished in the darkness, leaving no trace behind.

But the train, with its valuable freight, was safe; and for this, the townsmen had to thank Ralph Renwood and his brave companion, Headlight Harry. The gallant young fellows at once became the heroes of the hour.

Headlight Harry was particularly happy, for he found himself appointed regular fireman on the Atalanta. This appointment, made at his own request, afforded the railroad-boy great satisfaction, for it not only gave him an opportunity to be constantly with his bosom friend, but was also a prodigious stride forward to his coveted goal—the post of engineer.

Harry Hilton that night was the happiest youth in Richville.

"Cracky! I'll be a full-fledged engineer in a month," he assured himself, confidently.

Next day the usual trip was made without incident, Richville was reached shortly after nightfall and Headlight Harry, his day's work ended, bade good-night to his companion and cheerfully started for home.

He lived with his widowed mother in a modest little cottage nearly a mile from the railway-station. The way was a dreary one, leading for a considerable distance through a gloomy forest.

But Harry's heart was light, and so were his footsteps as he trudged blithely homeward, whistling a merry tune. Visions of the matronly woman waiting at the door to greet him with a kiss and a smile, and later, a smoking hot supper, with the delicacies that only his mother's hands could prepare—these formed a pleasant picture in the mind of the hungry railroad-boy, who hurried on, little thinking that fate was about to launch him into the most exciting adventures of his life.

He was fairly within the depths of the forest now, and, although the moon shone brightly without, an impenetrable gloom pervaded these shady recesses. Awed by the dreariness of his surroundings, the boy's whistle soon died away and he continued in silence.

Suddenly he halted, for his quick ear detected the rapid hoof-beats of a horse approaching from an opposite direction.

Headlight Harry immediately darted to the

side of the road and, crouching there in the bushes, waited for the rider to pass.

A moment later the horseman had arrived upon the scene, but instead of riding by he drew rein within arm's-length of the spot where the boy was hiding.

Through interstices in the foliage above a radiant moonbeam slanted into the glade, bathing steed and rider in its mellow glow; and as Headlight Harry gazed upon the features of the new-comer he gave a start that nearly betrayed his presence.

"It's Black Bart, the outlaw, or I'm a Chinaman!" he gasped.

CHAPTER V.

PLAYING THE SPY.

YES, it was the notorious chief of the train-robbers, as formidable as ever. A handkerchief was bound tightly about his brow, while several strips of court-plaster adorned his cheeks, heightening the ferocious expression of his naturally repulsive countenance.

His clothing was torn and muddy. Indeed, from Black Bart's *tout ensemble*, it was apparent that he was considerably the worse for wear, after his rough-and-tumble experience of the night before.

Headlight Harry gazed curiously at the notorious road-robber, as he sat upon his steed, motionless as a carved image. He was evidently waiting for some one; and the railroad-boy was on the *qui vive*, for the presence of Black Bart, at this place and hour, signified that mischief was brewing.

A minute passed; then from up the road came the shrill, peculiar call of the whippoorwill. Black Bart immediately echoed the signal; and then a man made his appearance on foot, coming from the direction of the town.

As the new-comer advanced, an involuntary exclamation escaped the lips of the youth in the bushes, for the friendly moonlight enabled him to recognize the man's features immediately.

The last arrival was Dave Darke, cashier of the Richville National Bank, and Ralph Renwood's unsuccessful rival for the hand of fair Grace Garland, daughter of the wealthy railway king.

"On hand, I see, Bart!" exclaimed the cashier, advancing promptly.

"Yes; and waiting this ten minutes," returned the outlaw, rather shortly. "Black Bart always keeps his word."

"Well, I'm sorry to keep you waiting, but it couldn't be helped," said Dave Darke, apologetically. "However, now I'm here, let's lose no time in getting down to business."

"Not here. Come back from the road a little, that we may be secure from observation. I'm mighty solicitous for the welfare of my precious neck."

"Curse the luck! I feel as though a freight-train had been running over me," continued Black Bart, as he dismounted with some difficulty.

"You look as if a cyclone had been wrestling with you," complimented the cashier, with a sardonic smile, as he followed the outlaw, who, leading his animal, left the trail and disappeared in the thicket.

Headlight Harry had listened to this brief conversation in open-mouthed astonishment, scarcely able to believe the evidence of his senses.

What meant this secret meeting in the forest? What were the relations of Dave Darke, a trusted bank official, with the notorious chief of outlaws?

"I allus sot Darke Dave down as a bad egg, but I didn't think he was so low down as to associate with Black Bart," soliloquized the railroad-boy. "Talks as if he'd knowed him fer years, too. One thing is certain—there's mischief on foot; an' shoot me fer a Chinaman, if I don't find out the whys and wherefores of this mysterious bizness. Here goes!"

Without the slightest hesitation, the intrepid lad followed the two men into the thicket.

They had halted in a little glade, a short distance from the road; and guided by the voices, Harry had no difficulty in locating their position. No naked Indian scout ever advanced upon the foe more cautiously than did the daring railroad-boy, who stole noiselessly from bush to bush, and finally reached a position close to the objects of his espionage.

He could just distinguish the forms of the two men, who had seated themselves, and were conversing in low tones.

"Curse the infernal luck! To think that we were outwitted, after the treasure was almost within our grasp," growled Black Bart. "Five

of my best men gone, and as many more wounded—*caramba!* It makes my blood boil to think of it."

"Bah! A few men's lives don't matter. You can easily get recruits to replace them. However, I had everything at stake. The success of this scheme was my only salvation. Now you have failed, what is to become of me?"

"I fail to understand why our failure should affect you, beyond the loss of your share of the spoils. You must have had another object, Dave, of which I knew nothing."

"Right, captain," allowed Darke, frankly. "Listen, and I will explain everything."

"Proceed!"

"Two years ago, Bart," began the bank cashier, "I was the trusted lieutenant of your powerful Brotherhood. No better man ever served you, if I, myself, do say it, until one day I chanced to see handsome Grace Garland. I fell desperately in love with the maiden, and swore to possess her for my own."

"To do so it was necessary for me to change my calling, for what pure girl would accept the attentions of an outlaw? True, I might easily have carried her off to our stronghold, but in that case I would forfeit all hopes of fingering her rich sire's fortune. I resolved to renounce outlawry, and become a virtuous citizen, until I could win my prize. Accordingly, I left your band, first taking an oath never to betray your secrets—"

"And you have kept your oath faithfully, Dark Dave," declared the road-agent chief, heartily.

"Well, I went to Richville and commenced my new career. Being tolerably well educated, intelligent, and not bad-looking, I soon managed to make myself quite a favorite with the townpeople, none of whom dreamed I was an ex-member of the dreaded Black Brotherhood. So well did I succeed that when the bank cashier died suddenly, I was appointed to fill the vacancy."

"But while I was thus making myself solid with the citizens at large, the fair object of my adoration did not seem very favorably impressed. Truth to tell, she was already in love with another—a handsome chap named Renwood, poor as a church-mouse, who earns a precarious livelihood by driving one of her rich father's engines; the same fellow, by the way, who ran the Express last night, and whose prowess was too much for you and your band of bloodhounds."

"Curse him!" gritted Black Bart.

"It took me some time to discover that my case was hopeless," continued Dave Darke. "Meanwhile, my passion for gambling led me to indulge, on the quiet, to a considerable extent. As luck was against me, and my salary was inadequate to the demand, I was consequently compelled to 'borrow' from the bank, from time to time, until, at the present moment, the deficiency amounts to a cool ten thousand dollars."

"Knowing that the time for the annual examination was near at hand, I naturally looked for some way out of the difficulty. Just then we received notice of a consignment of bullion. Here was a chance for salvation! I posted you in relation to the proposed shipment, on condition that I receive one-third of the plunder for the information."

"Had the plan succeeded, I could easily have made good the deficiency. But now, all is lost. To-morrow the bank examiners will be here, and my only chance is to—"

"Skip!" finished Black Bart, tersely.

"Exactly, captain! My career as an upright citizen of Richville is over. Now, I propose to resume my old position in your band, providing my presence is welcome."

Black Bart's eyes lighted with pleasure.

"Your old position as first lieutenant is open to you, Dave," he said. "The boys, what's left of 'em, will be glad to see you back once more. But the girl! Do you intend to accept your fate, and resign her to the tender embrace of this young engineer?"

"Never! The girl shall be mine!" Dark Dave fairly hissed. "That is the point I was coming at. The girl must be seized, and carried to our stronghold. Once there, I will tame the proud beauty, and laugh at the agony of my rival."

"But can this be done?"

"Yes, with your assistance."

"You shall have it," declared Black Bart, for the cashier had been a most valuable assistant, and the chief was elated at the prospect of his return to the band. "When is the deed to be done?"

"This very night. The girl's parents are both away, and there's no one at home but the

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servants. No time could be better. You know the premises, I suppose?"

"Every nook and cranny."

"And the men?"

"Are so near that a blast from this whistle would bring them to the spot."

"Good, captain!" exclaimed Dave Darke, elatedly. "I shall depend upon you."

"The girl shall be safe at the stronghold ere another sun rises," promised the outlaw leader. "And you?"

"To-morrow I shall shake the dust of Richville from my feet, but not until I have pocketed all the available funds that remain in the bank," declared the ex-lieutenant, grimly. "Expect me at the stronghold to-morrow night."

"Good! It is settled, then?" said Black Bart; and the nefarious scoundrels rose to their feet.

Meanwhile, Headlight Harry, from his hiding-place close at hand, had heard every word of this highly interesting conversation. To say that he was surprised would be to but faintly express the boy's feelings. The revelation of the bank cashier's true character and subsequent development of his diabolical plot, fairly stupefied him with disgust and amazement.

Indeed, it was not until the precious pair rose to depart that Harry was awakened to a true sense of his own danger.

The outlaws were advancing straight toward him, and were now so close that retreat was altogether out of the question. The railroad-boy could only hug the ground, hoping against hope that he would escape unnoticed.

With a prodigious stride Black Bart passed over the lad; but the lieutenant, as luck would have it, stumbled over the prostrate form and measured his length upon the earth.

"Hello! what's this?" ejaculated Dave Darke, as he quickly recovered himself and grasped the luckless eavesdropper by the collar.

With an eel-like motion of his sinewy body, Headlight Harry wriggled out of his jacket, and leaving that garment in the grasp of his would-be captor, sped away like a frightened deer.

"Blazes!" yelled the lieutenant, in blank dismay. "He must be caught, or everything is lost. After him, Bart!"

The outlaw chief was too stiff and sore to be of service in a foot-race, but Dark Dave sped in pursuit of the fugitive at a speed born of desperation.

With a mocking laugh Headlight Harry darted through the forest like an arrow. He could hear the heavy footsteps of his pursuers, but felt confident in his ability to outrun them, for he knew every foot of the ground like a book.

Alas! for the railroad-boy. He caught his foot against some projecting object, stumbled, and fell heavily to the ground. Before he could rise Dave Darke pounced upon him, and seized him in a vise-like grip.

Headlight Harry kicked and struggled desperately, but to no purpose; and presently Black Bart came up, growling and cursing.

"I've caught the spy, Cap," announced the lieutenant. "Strike a match and we'll see what the rascal looks like."

The chief struck a lucifer and held it before the face of the youth, who bore the malignant gaze of his captors without flinching.

"Headlight Harry!" gasped Dave Darke.

"The young cub that fit us on the locomotive," hissed Black Bart; and from his tone the unfortunate lad felt that he need expect no mercy.

"Glad you know me, gents!" he exclaimed, professing a cheerfulness that he was far from feeling. "Is there anything I kin do fer yer?"

"You infernal eavesdropper, what are you doing here? Heard all we said, I suppose?"

"Only a word or two," lied Harry, glibly.

"I was takin' a short cut home an' run across you gents accidentally."

"Bah! That game won't work, sweet innocent. But, what shall we do with the youngster?"

"He must die," declared Black Bart, positively. "His work last night has sealed his fate."

As he spoke the outlaw whipped out a huge knife, which he flourished in the face of the prisoner.

"Hold!" interposed Dark Dave. "The river is close at hand. Why not bind the boy to a log and set him adrift? The Devil's Jump is just below, and I'll warrant the young imp 'll never live to tell of his pleasure voyage down Mad River."

"Agreed! Lend a hand with the cub. Be quick, for time is precious!"

The two scoundrels at once strode off through the forest, bearing between them the helpless railroad-boy. A brief walk brought the party to the bank of the rushing, turbulent stream locally known as Mad River.

The diabolical plan was speedily put into execution. A large number of logs strewed the shore, and to one of these Headlight Harry was securely lashed, despite his desperate resistance.

This done, a vigorous shove sent the log far out into the stream, while the two fiends, laughing mockingly, turned and disappeared in the forest.

Caught up by the rushing current the log shot swiftly down the leaping, swirling tide, bearing its human freight on, on to—what?

CHAPTER VI.

BLACK BART'S MASTERSTROKE.

'Twas night! The sable goddess had spread her shadowy mantle over all. Nothing to relieve the inky blackness, save myriad stars that twinkled like wondrous jewels in the distant heavens.

Richville was wrapped in silence; her worthy citizens slept the sleep of the virtuous and just. It was at an early hour in the morning, when tired nature sleeps the soundest. Not a sound to disturb the stillness, save the mournful cry of the night-bird; not a light to be seen except at the railway station, for it was nearing the time for the Night Express to arrive, and the sleeping official whose duty kept him there nodded and blinked in blissful unconsciousness of what was transpiring about him.

Yet, in spite of the hour, Richville's streets were not altogether deserted.

Had any wakeful villager chanced to glance from his window, he might have been interested upon seeing a party of horsemen ride slowly along one of the roads which led from the outlying country.

Six of them, all told—grim, ghostly figures, seeming, in the indistinct light, a part of the steeds themselves—veritable centaurs, whose muffled hoofs gave forth no sound as they glided like phantoms through the street.

Mysterious as their presence might be, there was nothing supernatural about these grim night riders. Real flesh and blood every one; and the man who led the cavalcade was no other than Black Bart, the outlaw captain!

Their course led along the outskirts of the town and directly toward the residence of Richville's millionaire, Gilbert Garland, which stood upon an elevated site—the only habitation in the immediate vicinity.

"Hist!"

At this warning from their leader, the silent riders drew rein instantly. Motionless as statues they stood awaiting further orders.

"Yonder is the scene of our operations," whispered Black Bart, as he stretched one sinewy arm toward where the dark shape of the Garland mansion loomed against the starry sky. "The house is fully two hundred yards away, but it is unsafe to bring the animals nearer, lest some unfortunate noise should betray us."

"You, Slim Jim and Yellow Jack, come with me. The rest of you remain here with the horses. Do not stir from this spot until I rejoin you, unless you hear three sharp whistles in quick succession, which will be the signal of danger. In that case, bring up the animals without delay. Now, are my instructions thoroughly understood?"

"Ay, captain."

"Then let us get to work at once," and Black Bart swung from his saddle as he spoke, while the two men designated hastened to follow his example.

Like shadows, the three marauders swiftly advanced until a point was reached directly opposite the mansion. Here Black Bart paused to consider the situation.

It was a diabolical errand that sent the bold outlaw forth, that balmy autumn night. With characteristic daring, he was about to attempt the abduction of fair Grace Garland, and so fulfill his promise to Dave Darke, the treacherous bank cashier.

It was no easy task to force an entrance to a house, and carry away one of its inmates from the midst of numerous friends and servants. One less audacious than Black Bart, would have shrunk dismayed from an undertaking of such colossal magnitude.

The Garland mansion stood back a short distance from the highway, being surrounded by spacious grounds, beautifully ornamented by trees and flowers, crystal fountains, greensward and gravelly walks. A broad driveway led down to a rustic gate, now closed and fastened.

A magnificent residence, looming grand and stately in the mellow moonlight; but the outlaw captain had no eye for the beautiful. He was there on business, and immediately set to work.

It was an easy task to scale the gate; and the outlaws were soon crouching in the friendly shadows within the grounds.

From shrub to shrub, from tree to tree, the three marauders flitted like specters, and in this manner stealthily approached the mansion, pausing only when secure in the dense shadow thrown by the broad portico. Then Black Bart beckoned his followers to his side.

"I shall enter the house alone," he whispered.

"Remain here; and if I am successful, I will hand the girl down to you from the window. In case I am discovered, you know the signal. Rush in at once to the rescue."

Black Bart at once proceeded to climb to the roof of the portico. He ran up the strong lattice like a cat, and landed upon the flat roof without a sound. Several windows looked out upon the balcony, and trying these, one after another, the housebreaker was pleased to find one unfastened. To raise the sash and push his lithe body through the opening, was but the work of a moment, and Black Bart found himself fairly inside the mansion.

All was darkness within, not an object being visible. Alone in a strange house, at dead of night, one might naturally lose his bearings; but the outlaw, nevertheless, seemed perfectly at home.

In fact, Black Bart was better acquainted with the "lay" of the premises, than the Garland family might have desired, for, "once upon a time," he had figured prominently in a midnight visit, detrimental to the jewelry, silverware and other valuables.

The outlaw knew he was now standing in a spacious corridor, from each side of which opened the sleeping apartments of the family. One of these he was confident contained the object of his quest; yet it was impossible to locate the exact apartment.

As the marauder stood irresolute, his quick eye caught a faint gleam of light at the further end of the corridor. A single glance told him that the light came through the keyhole of one of the rooms, and from the faint sounds that followed, it was evident the occupant was astir.

An impatient exclamation escaped the lips of the midnight prowler.

The restless one might possibly leave the apartment, and this meant instant discovery to the bold outlaw. But stay! This person who threatened to disturb his plans, might be the very girl for whom he was in search.

This thought flashed through Black Bart's brain, as he glided forward with cat-like tread, and paused beside the door whence gleamed the tell-tale light. One hand touched a glittering dagger; the other a tiny vial of chloroform. Whatever the emergency, the captain was prepared to meet it.

Soft footsteps could be heard approaching the door, which was gently opened, while a form appeared in the opening.

It was the figure of a maiden, tall, supple and graceful; a face of rare beauty and intelligence, with sparkling brown eyes, and a wealth of silken hair falling about her neck and shoulders. Hastily attired in a neat-fitting wrapper, she burst upon the astonished gaze of the intruder like a beauteous vision.

It was indeed the lovely daughter of the railroad king.

Poor Grace Garland! Utterly unconscious of her terrible danger, she advanced deliberately into the corridor. Fate had led her straight into the lion's jaws!

Crouching low in the gloom, Black Bart for an instant feasted his gloating eyes upon the dazzling vision; then, recalling his purpose, he bounded like a panther upon his prey.

At sight of the burly ruffian, Grace recoiled with a loud shriek that echoed and re-echoed through the silent halls; but, ere she could turn to flee, the outlaw was upon her.

One sinewy arm encircled her frail form, as he hurriedly applied the chloroform to her nostrils. The subtle fluid performed its work well, and Grace Garland lay limp and motionless in her captor's arms.

However, her one cry had the desired effect, for it penetrated to the innermost recesses of the mansion. Lights appeared in various rooms, while the sound of hurrying feet warned Black Bart that the household was alarmed.

With an angry cry, the captain rushed down the corridor, bearing his precious prize, just as a number of servants, with lights, appeared upon the scene. Some of them were armed, but dared not fire, lest they should hit their mistress. Bewilderedly they stood in a huddled group, as the dare-devil outlaw, with a taunting laugh, bounded through the window to the roof of the balcony.

"Below there, boys!" yelled Black Bart, in stentorian tones.

"Here, cap'n," came the ready response of Yellow Jack.

"Lend a hand to catch the girl. Careful, now."

The captain sunk upon his knees at the edge of the balcony, and lowered his burden over into the waiting arms of his satellites. The next moment he, himself, swung hastily to the ground.

"Vamos, boys!" he cried. This racket will rouse the town, an' we will have a reg'lar hornets' nest 'round our ears. Git!"

The chief caught up his captive, and darted over the lawn at full speed, closely followed by his subordinates, just as the servants, having recovered their self-possession, issued from the mansion in pursuit.

The two outlaws drew their weapons, and fired several shots as they fled—a proceeding which caused the would-be rescuers to waver perceptibly, and gave Black Bart time to reach the gate with his prize.

With one sinewy arm entwined about the frail form of the unconscious maiden the outlaw chief clambered to the top of the gate just as his men rushed down the road with the horses.

But "there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip," and the captain's exultation quickly changed to dismay as he found his triumphant course suddenly checked in an unexpected manner.

There was a sound of clattering hoofs coming from a direction opposite the marauders and the next moment a shadowy band of riders thundered furiously upon the scene.

A party of Richvillians, belated in their return from some expedition or other, had approached the town and, attracted by the sound of fire-arms, rode up just in time to interrupt Black Bart's little scheme. They quickly took in the situation, and, with furious shouts, spurred into the midst of the discomfited outlaws.

There was a terrific shock as the two parties crashed together, followed by the sound of arms and excited shouts of the combatants. However, the conflict was of brief duration, for the outlaws, taken by surprise, quickly wheeled and fled.

After them thundered the victorious Richvillians. The latter were well-armed, and the sharp ring of their pieces made bitter music to the ears of the panic-stricken marauders.

Meanwhile, Black Bart had not been caught napping. Comprehending the situation at a glance, the wily captain had flung himself into the shadows of a convenient bush, while his two no less active companions were quick to follow him.

There they crouched as the horsemen galloped by their place of concealment speeding in pursuit of their routed comrades; nor did Black Bart venture forth until the hoof-beats of their animals grew faint in the distance.

The members of the Garland household were skurrying after the receding combatants, deluded by the belief that the chief and his captive had joined the fugitives, and to this mistake Black Bart owed his escape from instant discovery.

The outlaw chief was furious with rage and disappointment. The inopportune interference of the Richville party had checkmated a triumph all but attained and left him on foot in the midst of enemies.

To be sure, the crafty robber had eluded his foes at the outset; but it was only a question of a few moments when the party would discover their mistake and hurry back to find him. Besides, the sounds of conflict had aroused the sleeping town. Lights were twinkling in many dwellings and voices could be heard as the owners issued forth to learn the cause of the disturbance.

Black Bart glared wildly about. It was probable he must abandon his prize to save his own neck. Even then, dismounted as he was, the outlaw's chance of escape was exceedingly small.

Toot!—toot! Two shrill whistles at this moment rung upon the air, and glancing toward the railroad the captain beheld a flaming light that, gleaming like a ball of fire in the darkness, marked the course of a slowly-moving locomotive.

The early morning Express was due at Richville, and, the line being a long one, it was customary to change engines at this point. The relieving locomotive was run out upon the main line and held in readiness a few minutes beforehand; then the incoming engine made what is

termed a "flyingswitch," letting the train down upon the one waiting to receive it.

Thoroughly versed in railway knowledge, Black Bart knew well what the presence of the locomotive signified. A glad cry fell from the outlaw's lips, for he saw a possible avenue for escape.

Bidding his two men to follow, the captain ran swiftly toward the gleaming headlight bearing his lovely captive as lightly as a feather. It was his intention to capture the detached engine and run down the line ahead of the Express. An audacious trick, surely, but which, if accomplished, rendered escape a certainty. Visions of the hangman's noose made Black Bart desperate, and he fairly flew over the ground.

Behind the fugitives came the clatter of hoofs, telling the horsemen were returning from their wild-goose chase; and above the station could be heard the rumble of the approaching train. It was a trying moment for the dare-devil marauders!

The distance, several hundred yards, was quickly covered; and breathlessly the three robbers approached the locomotive. The engineer and fireman sat at their posts, unconscious of the impending danger. The engineer was "blowing off," and the noise of escaping steam drowned all other sounds.

Crack—crack! Two reports rung out, followed by agonized yells, as the luckless trainmen sunk bleeding upon the floor, shot down in cold blood by Black Bart's sure-shot assassins!

"Bravo!" yelled the outlaw captain, as a vigorous leap carried him into the cab. "Jump on lively, boys! The hell-hounds are close upon us!"

Just in time! The locomotive was surrounded by a crowd of excited citizens, who, however, were too dumfounded to act, and at a loss to comprehend what it all meant.

Dropping Grace Garland, the chief quickly threw over the lever, and pulled the throttle wide open. The driving-wheels spun round like lightning, but not an inch ahead did the ponderous machine move!

"A liddle sand, Jack!" commanded Black Bart, as he drew a brace of sixes, and fired shot after shot into the advancing crowd.

Aroused to action at sight of the audacious chief, the infuriated citizens rushed forward. But too late!

The huge wheels "bit the iron," and the locomotive shot ahead of the crowd like a meteor! Gaining fresh impetus at every revolution of the giant wheels, she flashed swiftly down the line, bearing away the triumphant outlaws and their prize!

CHAPTER VII. DRIFTING TO DOOM.

MIDNIGHT on Mad River! Darkness, deep and impenetrable, brooded over the turbulent stream. The verdant shores, the swirling, foam-flecked waters; the mighty forest stretching on either hand; the smiling sky o'erhead—all the objects which together formed so pleasing a panorama by day, were now, by the touch of Night's somber wand, merged into one abysmal chaos of blackness.

The sullen murmur of the waters; the mournful sighing of the night wind through the trees; the wolf's lugubrious howl, or the shrill cry of the night-bird—these sounds, alone, disturbed the awesome quiet of the scene.

Borne steadily onward by the resistless tide, a floating object breasted the sweeping current of Mad River—not a boat, but simply a drifting log; and upon its wave-washed surface lay stretched a human form!

Luckless Headlight Harry! It was, indeed, a terrible predicament into which his own inquisitiveness had led him. Consigned to the tender mercy of the elements, by the hands of his merciless captors! It was a situation calculated to discourage the boldest man.

The railroad boy had been powerless to escape, for in their grasp he was as an infant; but now, when the outlaws disappeared, and he found himself fairly embarked upon his involuntary voyage, Harry commenced a desperate struggle for freedom.

However, the ruffians had performed their work too thoroughly to make this an easy task. One sinewy thong bound the boy's legs firmly to the log, while another was passed tightly around his breast, at the same time confining his arms. Cunning hands applied the bonds, and strive as he might, they would not stir a particle.

So, perceiving his utmost efforts were futile, Harry soon ceased struggling, and set about to consider the situation with as much composure as could be expected under such trying circumstances.

The youth was lying face upward, and the rough log at his back formed a by no means pleasant resting-place; this, added to the fact that the tightly-drawn cords were cutting into his flesh, served to render his position, to say the least, uncomfortable.

But Headlight Harry cared nothing for his bruised and aching body; he heeded not the cutting cords, nor the icy wavelets that, breaking over the log, drenched him to the skin. Other thoughts were uppermost in his mind—thoughts of a deadly danger, the presence of which the poor youth knew full well.

Mad River was, from source to mouth, a rapid stream, but at this point its course was unusually rough and turbulent. Its surging waters leaped and rushed along, constantly gaining increased impetus, and finally made a terrible leap over a lofty precipice, falling far, far down into the rocky chasm below.

This cataract, with the rock-strewn whirlpools at the bottom, was locally known as the Devil's Jump; and the name, perhaps, was not inappropriate, for no one less supernaturally gifted than Old Nick could plunge over the dizzy brink, and live to boast of the exploit.

The Devil's Jump-off was below, and scarcely half a mile from where Headlight Harry was helplessly gliding down the stream, drawing nearer to the fatal spot with every passing moment.

The railroad-boy knew the location well. Often had he stood upon the shore below the falls, and watched the mighty flood, Niagara-like in its terrible grandeur; and now, powerless to move hand or foot, he was being borne to a frightful death in the depths of the horrible abyss, the very sight of which had filled his boyish soul with awe.

The thought caused the brave boy to shudder violently; indeed, it was a situation calculated to strike terror to the stoutest heart.

On flew the log with ever-increasing velocity, together with its human freight, borne swiftly onward by the merciless current. A low, sullen murmur reached the lad's ears, borne on the night-wind sweeping up Mad River. It was the noise of the cataract, and it rung in his ears like the knell of doom.

The sound roused Headlight Harry from the lethargy into which he was fast sinking, and stimulated him to almost superhuman exertions. With a strength and desperation born of despair, the boy writhed and twisted and strained till his veins stood out like whipcords, and perspiration poured down his face in streams.

But vain were his mighty efforts; for the sinewy thongs that bound him refused to yield a hair. Bleeding, breathless and exhausted, Headlight Harry sunk back upon the log, his strength exhausted, his last hope gone.

The moments flew by like lightning. The log sped faster and faster. Five minutes more would bring it to the brink of the precipice!

Louder grew the sound of the down-pouring cataract, till the sullen murmur had swelled to a deafening roar! Rougher became the waters, until the log, erstwhile riding smoothly, now rocked and quivered violently on the crest of the dancing surges! Huge, jagged rocks here and there reared their frowning heads above the surface, but the log passed them all unscathed.

Dense showers of spray flew over the craft, threatening to suffocate its occupant. Indeed, death in such a guise was preferable to a plunge over the Devil's Jump.

Swift danced the log o'er the angry waters! The night wind sung a mournful requiem for the poor soul rushing on to death. Fair Luna, queen of the night, sent her compassionate glance down, then sorrowfully hid her face behind a cloud, as if to shut out the dreadful scene!

The thunder of the cataract warned Headlight Harry that the critical moment was at hand, and, with closed eyes, the lad calmly awaited the inevitable.

He did not want to die—life was very sweet to him; but now, brought face to face with death, he could meet the grim destroyer bravely, and perish as a hero should.

Thoughts innumerable flashed like lightning through his brain. He thought of his mother, doubtless at that moment anxiously waiting for him at home—of Ralph Renwood and his many friends; then he tried to pray, just as the log leaped into the roaring, tumultuous waters of the Devil's Jump!

For an instant the log shot forward, rocking and plunging violently; then suddenly came a mighty crash, as the swiftly-speeding timber encountered some unseen object with terrific force.

Recoiling from the shock, the craft swung clear round, pitching and plunging violently; then, its momentum suddenly checked, rode like a ship at anchor on the breast of the tide.

Headlight Harry opened his eyes, and stared in utter amazement. Half stunned from his rough experience, the railroad-boy scarcely knew whether he was dead or alive.

The cataract, thundering close at hand, was still below him; and how he had escaped from plunging over the giddy brink was a question that mystified the youth not a little.

At this moment the moon reappeared, shining with increased brilliancy; and, thanks to her friendly rays, Harry was enabled to gain a faint idea of his surroundings.

Before him stretched the foam-flecked waters of Mad River; scarcely fifty feet beyond, a long dark line, surrounded by flying masses of spray, marked the spot where the flood took its terrible plunge.

On either side, a jagged rock rose abruptly from out the water. The space between was extremely narrow, so much so as to prevent the passage of the log, which, having struck one of the boulders with sufficient force to divert it from its original course, was sucked into the narrow opening, and thus became tightly wedged.

An omnipotent hand had guided the craft straight upon this rock—the only barrier between the youth and death. Had the log passed this point, nothing could have saved the railroad-boy.

Thankful for his marvelous escape, Headlight Harry set his wits to work to devise some means of extricating himself from his unpleasant predicament; for, half suffocated by the spray, and bruised from the log constantly beating against the rocks, his position was far from comfortable.

Besides, the turbulent waters, angry at being cheated of their prey, surged about the timber, threatening to tear it from its anchorage, and send it to continue its interrupted voyage.

The thought stimulated Harry to renewed strength and determination. Summoning all his power, the lad strained at the bonds which held his arms in a hempen vise. Joy! The stubborn thongs, so long immovable, now parted with a snap.

During the time that the log was thumping against the rock, a sharp, knife-like projection, constantly striking the cord, had been unconsciously performing the work that the boy's muscle failed to accomplish; until the rope was nearly severed, and it only needed his effort to complete the work of liberation.

The delighted youth's first act, after assuming a sitting posture, was to vigorously rub his benumbed arms to restore the circulation, after which, with the help of the jack-knife he always carried, it was but the work of a moment to liberate his feet.

Free once more, Headlight Harry leaped from the log and climbed laboriously to the top of the rock nearest the shore. But when this point was reached a brief glance told the boy that escape was not, even now, an absolute certainty.

Angry waters surrounded him on every hand. The river at this point was extremely narrow and the channel was upon one side of the stream; so the distance from the rock to the nearest shore was slight—an active man could have leaped it.

However, to the railroad-boy, bruised and sore and chilled to the bone, with no foothold save a wet and slippery ledge, it was an undertaking fraught with great danger.

But Headlight Harry was impatient to return to Richville to aid Grace Garland, whom he knew to be in deadly danger. Fearful that he would be too late to frustrate Dave Darke's scheme, the brave boy determined to risk the leap without delay.

Pausing for a moment to take breath, Harry poised upon the slippery ledge, carefully measuring the distance with his eye; then, concentrating all his strength, he shot like an arrow far out over the raging torrent!

In his exhausted condition the distance was too great for the boy to cover. Narrowly missing the coveted shore, he descended into the boiling water with a sullen splash; but as he fell, one hand stretched forth in a last despairing effort, and seizing upon a projecting spur of rock, clung to it with a grip of steel.

With superhuman strength the railroad-boy raised himself, inch by inch, until he was free from the sweeping current, then crawled laboriously up the slippery bank.

Safe at last! But the effort was too much for the gallant boy. Exhausted nature could do no

more! Headlight Harry's brain reeled, and pitching forward he fell heavily to the earth, lying unconscious in the mellow moonlight!

CHAPTER VIII.

ON THE TRAIL.

WHEN Headlight Harry at length recovered his senses, the night was far advanced. Quickly recalling the incidents of that eventful night, the boy struggled to his feet, regretful that so much valuable time had been lost. Perhaps, even now, the dark deed was accomplished, and Grace Garland in the toils of her enemies. Hoping against hope that he would yet arrive in time, the lad hurried from the spot.

Covered with cuts and bruises, stiff, sore, and benumbed with cold, every step caused the poor boy pain; but, ignoring his own suffering, he pressed bravely on.

It was fully three miles to Richville, following the devious course of Mad River; but Harry, knowing every square foot of the country, adopted a "bee-line" across fields and meadows, making the distance much shorter.

On through the darkness hastened the bold railroad-boy! In his excited condition, minutes seemed like hours; though in reality, it was an incredibly short time, when in the distance he saw the lights of Richville gleaming.

As Headlight Harry dashed across a field, in the direction of the Garland residence, he was startled by the rapid report of fire-arms, while lights appeared at the mansion, and excited voices reached his ears.

"My God! I'm too late! The fiends are already at work!" gasped the boy, divining the truth instantly.

Dashing madly ahead, Headlight Harry strained every nerve to reach the scene of combat. When he arrived upon the spot, the encounter was over; the mounted party were in hot pursuit of the fleeing bandits, while the moonlight revealed Black Bart, accompanied by two companions, hurrying in the opposite direction, with Grace Garland clasped in his arms.

One glance at the flying outlaws, another at the waiting locomotive, and Harry comprehended the bold design of the bandit chief. Instantly he darted in pursuit, hoping to prevent the audacious escape.

It was impossible to overtake the fugitives, indeed, it was lucky for Harry that they were unaware of his presence, for in his excitement he overlooked the fact that he was alone and unarmed, and had he been discovered, Black Bart's sure shots would have made quick work of the reckless boy.

Others than Harry were hurrying in that direction, but the railroad-boy was first upon the spot, rushing up just as the outlaw captain sprung to the throttle.

Realizing it was too late to prevent the escape, Headlight Harry, acting upon a ready impulse, and determined to follow the fleeing abductors, made a desperate leap for the engine as it glided past him.

So, when the stolen locomotive shot down the line like a fiery meteor, it carried an extra passenger in the person of Headlight Harry, who clung desperately to the rear of the tender!

The youth's recklessness nearly cost him his life, for at this moment a crowd of citizens rushed up. They caught sight of the clinging form, and, mistaking it for one of the marauders, made it the target for a choice volley of pistol-shots.

Bullets whizzed viciously about the head of the railroad-boy, but, fortunately, not one of them reached its intended mark, and the next moment the engine was out of sight of the beligerent Richvillians.

Over the rails like lightning sped the stolen engine. The Night Express had the "right of way," and as the outlaws were only a few minutes in advance of the train's time, they could safely calculate on a clear track. Black Bart stood at the lever, and managed the machine like a veteran—indeed, the notorious bandit had once been an engineer on that very road, and a good one, too, until he abandoned the position for the more lucrative pursuit of train-robbing.

Headlight Harry's position was a trying one. He sat astride of the iron bumper, clinging to the chain which hung from the tender, and which was attached to the coupling-pin. Perched in this uncomfortable position, the boy held on desperately, the breath nearly jolted from his body by the swift motion of the locomotive.

If the chain broke, nothing could save him from being precipitated to death upon the track below. Harry resolved to gain a safer position,

though at the risk of discovery. With some difficulty he reached the top of the tender, and crouched behind the wood-pile, (for on this road wood was used for fuel), from which position he was able to obtain a good view of the cab and its occupants.

The three outlaws were attentively scanning the track ahead, unaware of the presence of an enemy. Grace Garland lay passive upon the floor, not yet fully possessed of consciousness, and at the sight of the poor girl, Headlight Harry could hardly resist the impulse which prompted him to throw himself upon her captors, tooth and nail.

Luckily, the lad's discretion conquered his temper. Reckless as the youth had been, to follow the outlaws, alone and unaided, yet there was method in his madness. It was his intention to discover where Black Bart carried his captive, and then call his friends to the rescue.

Making himself as comfortable as circumstances would permit, Harry patiently waited for the wild ride to terminate. Smith's Siding, the next station, was soon reached. The operator, doubtless awakened from a nap, rushed bewilderedly out upon the platform; but before he could rub his sleepy eyes open, the engine flashed by like the wind.

Madly they rushed on their wild career; the big wheels spun like lightning, while the whole machine shook and trembled, as it tore wildly around the sharp curves, threatening at times to leave the "iron" entirely. Black Bart had pulled the throttle wide open, and drove the engine as if a legion of fiends were close behind him.

Suddenly the outlaw captain shut off steam and reversed the lever. He was about to stop the engine.

Headlight Harry was on the alert, and quickly retreated to his old position on the bumper. The speed of the locomotive slackened gradually, and just before it stopped, the boy released his hold and dropped lightly and safely to the track.

Swiftly he darted to one side, and, lurking in the shadows, watched the movements of the three marauders.

Black Bart's men quickly left the engine, bearing the captive girl between them, while the captain deliberately restarted the machine, then swung briskly off and rejoined his followers.

Away went the locomotive, left to its own guidance, gaining increased speed at every revolution of its huge wheels. What would be the end of its wild career? Perchance to jump the track; or worse, to collide with some human-freighted train, and send scores of precious lives into eternity!

Little cared Black Bart! With a fiendish chuckle he watched the lone engine roll around a bend out of sight, then turned his attention to the work before him.

At this point the railroad crossed a narrow stream, whose deep, still waters flowed into Mad River, some distance below. To the bank of this creek Black Bart hurriedly led the way.

A brief search among the rushes brought to view a long, light boat, into which the outlaws clambered.

Meanwhile, Headlight Harry was not to be baffled. It was no easy task to follow the bandits, for already the gray light of morning had appeared in the eastern skies, and objects were fast becoming visible. However, creeping like a very sleuth-hound, the boy succeeded in reaching the water's edge without detection, just as the men in the boat pushed off from the shore, and headed the craft up-stream.

And now a new difficulty arose. How could he follow the boat fast enough to keep pace with the sturdy strokes of the outlaws, and yet remain undiscovered? However, the cunning spy quickly solved this problem.

Headlight Harry could swim like a fish, so, dropping noiselessly beneath the water, he shot swiftly after the receding boat. So precisely did he calculate, that when at length he came to the surface, it was to find himself at the very stern of the craft.

Grasping the boat with one hand, the lad swam easily in the wake, ready to dive again in case of discovery. Indeed, there was little danger of the latter, for trees and bushes grew thickly upon the bank, their branches forming an impenetrable archway overhead, and objects in the creek were well-nigh invisible.

Propelling the boat up-stream with long, powerful strokes, the outlaws proceeded for perhaps half a mile. Then suddenly they turned the boat's prow toward the shore.

Perceiving they were about to land, the spy released his hold and dropped beneath the sur-

face; when he rose again, he was safe among the rushes on the opposite side of the stream.

The craft shot swiftly toward the shore, and, with its occupants, disappeared from view. Whither had it vanished so mysteriously?

For several minutes Harry waited, his eyes glued on the spot where the outlaws disappeared; then, as the boat failed to materialize, he resolutely crossed the stream.

Once there, he beheld a curious sight.

Great wreaths and festoons of vines hung from the branches, like myriad serpents. Thickly interlaced, they reached to the water's edge, forming a complete curtain for some distance along the shore.

The young trailer cautiously parted this natural curtain, and then the mystery of the boat's disappearance was revealed. The craft was drawn up on the bank, but its occupants had vanished; whither, was indicated by the narrow, rugged path leading from the water's edge.

For a moment Headlight Harry hesitated. He surmised that the secret trail led to the stronghold of the Black Brotherhood. Most lads would have sought assistance before venturing further; but the railroad-boy resolved to press on alone, and locate the whereabouts of the bandits beyond the possibility of a mistake.

Carefully replacing the vines, the trailer advanced stealthily along the secret path, not without fear, for at any moment a lurking bandit might perforate him with a bullet.

The trail was a narrow, winding one, and ascended gradually, being lined with overhanging bushes, and strewn with loose rocky fragments. Harry was compelled to use the utmost caution, lest a chance misstep should betray him. As he advanced, the path grew more precipitate, and the lad judged that he was climbing the side of a mountain.

At last a gleam of daylight appeared ahead, warning the trailer that the end of the path was near. Forsaking the trail, Harry entered the bushes, continuing his way until the thicket merged into an extensive clearing.

Pausing at the edge of the thicket, Harry cautiously parted the bushes, and looked out into the clearing—gazed in surprise and wonder, for he saw before him the secret stronghold of Black Bart's Brotherhood!

CHAPTER IX.

"TREED."

A MINIATURE plateau, level as a floor, formed the tip-top of the mountain. Three sides ended abruptly at the verge of a towering cliff, steep and inaccessible; while upon the remaining side, the narrow path afore-mentioned descended to the river, and formed the only means of approach. The mountain-top was heavily wooded; but the industrious outlaws had cleared away a space in the center, and erected a number of rude huts.

This was the stronghold of the Brotherhood, long and vainly sought for by the authorities. No one dreamed of looking for Black Bart at the tip-top of Mad Mountain; and, indeed, the discovery would have been of little value, for the position was well-nigh impregnable. Approached from only one direction, a few resolute, well-armed men upon the summit could hold an army at bay. From his elevated hiding-place, the bandit chief could, with a glass, look into the very streets of Richville, a dozen miles away.

The plateau at this moment presented a lively spectacle. A number of horses were tethered at one end of the clearing, though it must have been difficult to get them up the path. Over a dozen rough, burly fellows, members of the Black Brotherhood, were scattered about, lounging in various attitudes, proceeding to enjoy themselves after a hard night's labor. The redoubtable captain stood in the door of his cabin, stroking his fierce mustache in evident satisfaction.

Crouching in his covert, Harry looked interestedly upon the picturesque scene. He could see nothing of Grace Garland; but there was a hut near the edge of the clearing, somewhat isolated from the others, and on the grass in front of it was stretched a solitary outlaw, evidently on guard.

His presence led the spy to believe that this particular cabin held the maiden of whom he was in search. The audacious lad determined to make sure of this, and also make Grace aware of his presence.

Cautiously he changed his position, until he was directly behind the hut, which was hardly a dozen yards from where he was concealed. This change of base brought the cabin between him and the outlaws; and Harry saw with

satisfaction that he could approach without much fear of discovery.

With desperate courage Headlight Harry crept across the intervening space.

The hut was a rickety structure, much less substantially built than the others. It consisted of a frame-work of poles, with rude walls of bark and old canvas, hastily patched together.

Reaching the rear of the shanty, the youth peered eagerly through a convenient orifice in the leaky wall. A brief glance told him that he had not guessed incorrectly, for the hut contained Black Bart's captive.

In one corner was a rude couch of bearskins, and upon this reclined Grace Garland, weeping violently.

At sight of the lovely girl Harry's heart gave a thrill of pleasure.

"Grace!—Miss Grace!" he whispered, softly.

At the sound of a familiar voice pronouncing her name the captive started up in astonishment.

"Hist! Don't make a noise!" warned the lad, softly. "It's I, Harry Hilton, an' I've come to save you."

Drawing a keen-edged jack-knife from his pocket Headlight Harry went to work upon the canvas wall. It took but a short time to make an opening large enough to admit his slender body, and then he crawled noiselessly inside and clasped the hand of the delighted maiden.

"I'm so glad to see you, Harry!" she exclaimed, half-smiling through her tears. "But how came you here?"

"Reckon my legs brought me, 'cept when I was riding," answered the boy, quaintly. "But, I say, Miss Grace, this is a deuced pickle you've got into, eh?"

"I am frightened nearly to death, though as yet no indignity has been offered me. I suppose this outrage has been committed to obtain money, for the wretches know my father is wealthy, and would gladly pay any sum for my ransom."

Headlight Harry shook his head decidedly.

"Not by a jugful!" he declared. "I happen to know the ins an' outs of this scheme, an' kin tell you you're clear off the track. Miss Grace, you owe your present position to one of your would-be-if-he-could-be fellers—Dave Darke, the bank cashier, who is a member of this outlaw band."

And the railroad boy proceeded to tell how he had chanced to overhear the plot and briefly outlined his adventures while attempting to prevent the abduction.

Grace Garland listened in undisguised horror. Much as she disliked the cashier, she had not believed him capable of such an atrocious outrage. The boy's revelation multiplied the terrors of her situation a thousand-fold.

"Harry, no time is to be lost," exclaimed the girl, excitedly. "Unless help comes soon I am doomed to a horrible fate, and you are the one on whom I rely for assistance."

"An' betcher life I'm with you, through thick an' thin, Miss Grace."

"You must leave me at once, Harry. If these rough men discover you, everything is lost. Hurry back to Richville, and apprise my friends of my danger. I know they will come at once to my rescue."

"An' especially one that I knows of—Ralph Renwood, eh? I bet Ralph's boiler is bu'stin' with grief 'bout this time; an' 'ro engine on the line 'll bring him here quick enough, when he knows where you are."

"I'm going, Grace! The mornin' mail is soon due, an' I'll flag 'em at the bridge with this," displaying a huge red handkerchief. "They'll carry me home in a couple o' shakes, an' then I'll find Ralph, an' we'll get up a gang that'll come down here an' swipe the Black Brotherhood clean outer their boots. Expect to see all Richville here in a few hours. Don't get down-hearted, miss. Now, good-by!"

Pressing the girl's hand, Headlight Harry turned to depart, only to recoil with a sharp cry of dismay.

At that moment the door of the hut flew open, and on the threshold stood the outlaw sentinel!

For some reason or other, the guard had become suspicious that all was not well, and so appeared upon the scene just in time to block the escape of the railroad-boy.

For an instant the two glared at each other in mutual surprise; then the outlaw moved forward, his hand seeking a revolver.

Quick as he was, Headlight Harry was quicker! Uttering a yell that would have done credit to a Comanche warrior, he leaped swiftly forward, and drove his head full against the outlaw's stomach.

With a grunt of pain the fellow collapsed, the breath driven from his body by the terrific blow. The boy, also, was upset by the shock, and rolled over and over upon the ground.

Hurriedly scrambling to his feet, the lad dashed away, just as the entire party, hearing the disturbance, rushed upon the scene.

"A spy! After him, boys!" yelled Black Bart.

With a defiant shout, Headlight Harry darted into the thicket. He was cut off from the path, and now found himself where, probably, the foot of man had never trod before; but the lad cared not for this, so long as he escaped the clutches of the Brotherhood.

Recklessly he plunged down the rugged mountain-side, tearing through the dense thickets, overleaping fallen trees and massive boulders that everywhere strewed the way.

Half-way down the hill, Harry suddenly checked his headlong flight, pausing at the verge of a giddy precipice, over which it was certain death to leap.

His retreat cut off, the lad stood like a stag at bay. He could hear the outlaws crashing through the bushes in hot pursuit. Wildly he glared about him for some means of escape.

Close at hand stood what had once been a mighty oak, but now all that remained was about twenty feet of the trunk. A huge cavity at the base showed that it was hollow.

As Harry's gaze fell upon the tree, he saw a possible way of escape. Hurriedly he scrambled into the hollow trunk, just as the party of outlaws arrived upon the spot.

From his place of concealment, the lad could hear the voices of his enemies, as they paused at the brink of the precipice. They were evidently discussing the probability of his falling over the cliff, and he fervently hoped they would come to that conclusion and go away.

Several minutes passed, and then Harry could hear the ruffians gathering around the tree. Had they suspected the truth? Hoping against hope, the lad waited breathlessly.

Suddenly something was thrust against the opening, and a bright light flashed in the eyes of the fugitive. Then followed the crackling of flames, and an instant later a puff of smoke ascended.

The outlaws had suspected that the hollow tree contained their foe, and with devilish ingenuity had collected and set fire to a quantity of damp leaves and other material, intending to smoke out the "treed" fugitive.

Headlight Harry viewed this proceeding with unutterable disgust. His situation was becoming uncomfortable.

The burning leaves created a dense smoke, which poured up into the boy's face, threatening to suffocate him.

The tree being hollow to the top, Harry, by digging his knees and shoulders into the sides of the trunk, managed to work himself gradually upward, until his head was on a level with the top; but the change of position afforded no relief, for the smoke steadily increased in volume.

In dense, black wreaths, it curled about the unfortunate lad, entering his mouth and nose, and making breathing difficult. Choking and sputtering, he stood it as long as it was endurable. To remain there meant speedy death from suffocation, so, with considerable reluctance, Headlight Harry poked his head above the tree-top, and looked down upon—

A circle of outlaws, grimly surrounding the tree, each with a leveled weapon covering the head of the railroad-boy!

The appearance of the latter was the signal for an outburst of merriment. Scratched and bleeding, with torn clothes, and face smoked until it resembled that of an Ethiop, Headlight Harry presented a ludicrous spectacle.

"Oh, ho! Went in a white man, an' cum out a coon! How d'ye think ye feel, young man?" sung out a burly bandit, while other remarks, more or less sarcastic, assailed the crestfallen spy.

Harry vouchsafed no reply to the badinage. His situation was not calculated to place him in a jocular mood.

"Come down off'n your perch, my gay black-bird, or we'll give you some leaden pills to masticate," then came the stern command, and the boy had no alternative but to obey.

The moment he reached the ground, he was pounced upon and made prisoner, after which the party returned triumphant to the stronghold.

Black Bart was impatiently awaiting the result of the chase. At first he did not recognize the dirty, smoke-begrimed features of the railroad boy; but when he did, it was to start back with a cry of undisguised amazement.

"Headlight Harry! Is it possible?" he gasped, scarcely able to credit the evidence of his senses.

"It's me, ole hoss, what's left of me," retorted the youth, rather enjoying the captain's dismay.

"How did you escape from the river?"

"If any one asks yer, tell him yer don't know. You ain't the only smart feller on earth, I reckon."

"Bah! You crow loudly, my young rooster; but this time I'll see that the job is done thoroughly. Take him away, men, until I decide how to dispose of him. Watch him well, for he's a slippery rascal!"

Headlight Harry groaned aloud as he was led away. What would become of poor Grace Garland, now?

CHAPTER X.

RENWOOD TAKES A HAND.

INTENSE excitement reigned at Richville on the morning of Black Bart's daring exploit. It took some time to discover the true meaning of the commotion; but when it was found that Grace Garland had been stolen from her home, public indignation knew no bounds. The dread news spread like wildfire, and soon every person in the village had gathered around the railroad station.

Among the first to reach the spot was Ralph Renwood, the dashing young engineer. Half-crazed with grief at the sorrowful intelligence, yet he was the coolest man in the crowd, everything considered. As soon as he could learn the particulars of the abduction, Ralph rushed to the telegraph-office.

The engineer was a skillful operator, and immediately taking possession of the instrument, wired the next station for intelligence of the lost locomotive.

Back came an answer from Smith's Siding, saying the engine had passed there, with several persons aboard.

Further inquiry elicited the response that the runaway had passed Benton, the next station beyond, empty.

This showed that the abductors had abandoned the locomotive at some point between Smith's Siding and Benton.

Mindful of the company's welfare, Ralph Renwood flashed along the line an order to stop the runaway if possible, and prevent any chance of collision. Soon came the welcome intelligence that the engine had been side-tracked and ditched at a point some twenty miles away, with no further damage than its own destruction.

No sooner did daylight dawn than a large party of resolute, well-armed citizens set out to hunt for the bold marauders. No one had recognized any of the abductors; but all devilry was promptly attributed to the dreaded Black Brotherhood, and so the Richvillians rightly concluded that they were responsible for this latest outrage. It was generally supposed that Black Bart, desperate after his recent defeat, had stolen the railway magnate's daughter, in hopes of obtaining a large ransom.

Ralph Renwood accompanied the rescuing party. Considering the circumstances, no one could expect the grief-stricken engineer to go on duty; so a competent substitute was provided to run the Day Express.

All day the party searched along the line, where it was supposed the outlaws left the engine with their captive. But Black Bart had covered his tracks well, and not a sign could be discovered. Tired and discouraged, the party returned to Richville at nightfall, completely baffled. The rescue of Grace Garland was as far away as ever.

Gloomy and depressed in spirits, Ralph Renwood paced moodily along the main street, alone.

Just as he reached the block wherein the Richville National Bank was located, the doors swung open and a man emerged from the building. As he stood upon the steps, under a flaring lamp-light, Ralph Renwood recognized the features of his unsuccessful rival in love—Dave Darke.

There was nothing remarkable about his presence there, being cashier of the institution, although it was long after bank hours; yet, something prompted the engineer, who was on the opposite side of the street, to pause in the shadows and watch his movements.

Pausing upon the broad steps, the cashier looked cautiously up and down the street. The thoroughfare was deserted.

Dropping the small valise which he carried, Darke drew from his pocket a sheet of paper, and proceeded to attach it to the door. This done, he picked up his bag and hurried away.

The young engineer looked after him interestedly.

"I don't like the looks of that fellow," he muttered. "In my opinion a greater rascal don't remain unhung. The bank directors might have made a wiser choice, I'm thinking, when they appointed Dave Darke cashier."

Ralph quietly crossed the street, curious to learn what important announcement was transcribed upon the placard so conspicuously posted by the cashier.

What he read filled him with unbounded astonishment.

It was a sheet of foolscap paper, bearing upon its face the following, written in a bold, dashing hand:

"RICHVILLE, Sept. 20, 1877.

"To the citizens in general, and the officials of the First National Bank, in particular:—This is to notify you that, owing to unavoidable circumstances, I am compelled to resign the cashiership of this institution to accept my old position as first assistant of the famous collecting agency known as Black Bart's Brotherhood. As the annual examination occurs to-morrow, I will spare you the trouble by the information that my accounts are short just \$10,986.75. I have, also, just appropriated what funds are available, which will save you the trouble of counting the cash. For further particulars apply at the headquarters of the Black Brotherhood. Regretting that cruel Fate has torn me from your esteemed society, I remain,

"Yours, for wealth,

"DAVE DARKE, *Ex-Cashier.*"

Such was the audacious epistle that Ralph Renwood read over and over, hardly believing his own eyes.

That Dave Darke was an ex-outlaw, and had even now gone to rejoin the notorious Black Brotherhood, taking with him the entire bank's fund—this startling announcement fairly dumfounded the engineer, who stood for some moments staring at the flaunting placard.

His first resolve was to alarm the authorities, and send a party in pursuit of the audacious robber, who could not be very far away.

As Renwood turned to go, a street boy came running up.

"A letter for you, Ralph," he said, familiarly; for all the town boys knew and admired the engineer.

"A letter for me?" repeated the young man, in surprise. "Who sent it, Johnnie?"

"Dave Darke, the cashier."

"A letter from the outlaw! By Jove! the fellow seems to take a sudden fancy to slinging ink. What farewell message can he have for me, I wonder?"

Seizing the proffered missive, Ralph hastily broke the seal, and read these few taunting words:

"RICHVILLE, Sept. 20, 1877.

"RALPH RENWOOD, *esteemed rival*:—

"Doubtless you are so deeply concerned for the welfare of your stolen affianced, Grace Garland, that any information regarding her whereabouts will be thankfully received. Therefore, I am pleased to inform you that she is at present safe at Black Bart's stronghold, being carried thither at my own instigation. Being unable to win her hand by fair means, I am compelled to resort to foul, believing that 'he who laughs last, laughs best.' When you receive this I shall be far away, hastening to join my bonny bride to be. Ha, ha! Revenge is sweet! Hoping you will survive the shock, I am

"Your successful rival,

"DAVE DARKE."

Furious with anger, Ralph Renwood hurled the insulting message from him.

"So he's at the bottom of this infernal work!" he hissed. "The scoundrel! I'll follow him to the furthest ends of the earth!"

The boy who brought the message was still standing a few steps away.

"Johnnie, when was the message given to you?"

"Not ten minutes ago, sir. The cashier rode up on horseback, and handed me the letter. He gave me a quarter to carry it, and said I'd be likely to find you at the hotel. He seemed in a terrible hurry, and rode off at full speed."

"In which direction?"

"Out upon the Benton road."

"Thanks!" and Ralph, tossing the lad a coin, hastened down the street.

The engineer was determined to pursue his enemy; and if he wished to overtake him, no time was to be lost, for the ex-cashier had already quite a start. A livery-stable was close at hand, and Ralph, being well acquainted with the proprietor, soon had the best horse in the establishment at his disposal.

Springing into the saddle, the young man spurred swiftly away.

The Benton road was, for some distance, straight and free from intersections, and Ralph hoped to soon overtake the fleeing lieutenant.

The engineer's blood was boiling, as he spurred madly along the highway, up-hill and down, his keen eyes vainly piercing the darkness for some trace of his foe.

Half a mile after mile was swiftly traversed, and still the fugitive appeared to be far in advance. Doubtless he anticipated pursuit, and was making the most of his start.

Suddenly, as Ralph Renwood dashed along, a bright light flashed in the gloom beyond, quickly followed by sharp report, and a bullet whizzed viciously by the young man's head, clipping a lock from his temple as it passed.

Startled by the sudden shot, Ralph's horse swerved suddenly to one side, and the engineer, not expecting this movement, lost his balance, and fell heavily to the earth.

Down the road galloped the frightened steed, leaving the young man, bruised and breathless, outstretched in the sand.

As he fell, a dark form rushed out of the thicket and quickly approached.

"Lucky I suspected I was followed," came the unmistakable voice of Dave Darke. "I imagine I have given the fellow his never-get-over. Who can he be, I wonder?"

The cashier bent over to scrutinize the prostrate form; but Renwood, recovering from the fall, bounded to his feet, and grappled with the would-be assassin.

Darke was Ralph's superior in size; but rage and desperation endowed the young engineer with almost superhuman strength, and he attacked his foe with the fury of a tiger.

Struggling fiercely, the two men reeled across the road, then fell heavily to the ground, locked in a firm embrace. Dave Darke was undermost, and lay like a log beneath his antagonist. In falling, his head struck a fragment of rock with force enough to render him insensible.

First assuring himself that Darke was not playing 'possum, Renwood arose and grimly contemplated his vanquished foe.

"Cowardly assassin!" he hissed. "To-morrow's sun shall find you behind bolts and bars, there to remain until a just law puts an end to your career of crime!"

But the engineer laughed too soon! At that moment a number of dark forms rushed upon him, and bore him to the earth. In spite of his desperate resistance, he was soon bound hand and foot.

Grim and silent, the new-comers gathered about their prisoner. All were masked and armed to the teeth; and Ralph Renwood's heart sunk within him, for he knew he was in the power of the Black Brotherhood!

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE TOILS.

HAVING overpowered the luckless engineer, Black Bart's marauders turned their attention to the fallen lieutenant, who was beginning to show signs of returning consciousness.

Dave Darke was considerably the worse for wear, and labored under the impression that a rampant cyclone had struck him; but a good long pull from a comrade's bottle had beneficial effects, and soon the ex-cashier was able to keep his feet.

It was with a look of malignant hatred that he surveyed his helpless rival.

"So you were following me, eh? How fortunate! I'm glad my shot missed; for now I shall have the pleasure of your company at the wedding ceremony, of which you shall be an interested witness. After that, I will endeavor to give the boys a little amusement, with your distinguished self for the chief attraction. Ha, ha!"

Ralph Renwood's face grew fairly livid with wrath, and he struggled like a demon to burst his bonds.

"Fiend!" he hissed. "Lucky for you I am not free. I would kill you like a dog!"

Dave Darke turned away with a taunting laugh.

"Come, boys! There's no time to waste in dallying. Bring this fellow along; and mind you handle him gently. A rare bit of amusement he'll afford, when we arrive at headquarters."

Away went the marauders, bearing the helpless engineer in their midst. After an hour of rapid journeying, the party reached the mountain stronghold, and received a cordial welcome from Black Bart and the members of the Brotherhood then present.

Fierce were the glances directed upon the captive engineer. Ralph Renwood's plucky defense of the train, at the time of the attempted robbery, was still fresh in their minds, and the knowledge that he was now in their power caused universal satisfaction.

As Renwood was led up to where the cheery firelight illuminated the scene, it was to find his friend, Headlight Harry, closely guarded.

In mute astonishment, the two youths stared at one another. Neither spoke; for their hearts were too full for utterance. Each had relied on the other for assistance, being of course ignorant of one another's whereabouts; but now the knowledge that both were in the power of their enemies, was enough to plunge them into the depths of despair.

Dave Darke, too, came in for a share of surprise. With his own hand he had set Headlight Harry adrift upon Mad River, and imagined him dashed to pieces upon the rocks of the Devil's Jump. Yet there stood the railroad-boy, much the worse for wear, but unmistakably in the flesh. The ex-cashier could not understand it, and superstitiously held aloof until Black Bart advanced and made the mystery clear.

"Well, if we keep on, I shall have the whole of my friends at the wedding," said the lieutenant, complacently. "Our doughty young voyager shall accompany his friend to the happy land, to-morrow. The more the merrier. Ha, ha!"

The prisoners were led away, under a strong guard; and then Black Bart called his men together. The band gathered around the captain, by whose side stood Dave Darke. Waving his hand for silence, Black Bart addressed the assemblage:

"Men, I have to announce the return to our Brotherhood of our old comrade, Dark Dave, who, as first lieutenant of the band, formerly served long and well. I hereby appoint him to his old position, with authority second only to my own, and trust that the return of Lieutenant Darke will bring increased prosperity to the Black Brotherhood."

Ringling cheers greeted this announcement, for Dave Darke was a universal favorite.

However, there was one among them who failed to share the general satisfaction. A swarthy Mexican named Gaspard had been made lieutenant to succeed Darke, resigned; and now the return of the latter relegated him to his former subordinate position, a proceeding that naturally failed to please the dark-skinned son of Mexico.

But the Greaser knew better than to openly express his dissatisfaction. He simply scowled vindictively, and covertly shook his fist at his more popular successor.

Lieutenant Darke soon separated himself from the group, and sought the captain of the Black Brotherhood.

"Well, are you satisfied now?" demanded that worthy, grimly.

"Perfectly. Allow me to say, captain, that you are a jewel. Why, the town is astounded at your daring trick! The good citizens are rushing about like a lot of maddened hornets. But the fair maid—I suppose she is here?"

"Safe in yonder cabin, anxious, I s'pose, to see you," said Black Bart, sarcastically. "By the way, Dave, how did you leave our friends at Richville?"

"Under such circumstances that I shall hardly venture there again, unless with the Black Brotherhood at my back."

"Of course you drained the bank before leaving. How much did you get?"

The eyes of the captain glittered avariciously as he spoke; however, the reply was far from encouraging.

"Nothing worth mentioning," answered Dave Darke. "You see, the cash had dwindled considerably, owing to my previous demands upon it; so everything available amounted to but a couple of hundreds, excepting a quantity of silver, too bulky to bring away."

Thus glibly lied the lieutenant of the Black Brotherhood. He did not deem it necessary to mention the gripsack, filled with fat bundles of greenbacks, which he had carefully hidden by the roadside, soon after so hastily leaving Richville.

"I think I'll stroll over and call upon my handsome bride-to-be," remarked the scoundrel, coolly turning away from the disappointed captain.

"Fool! Did he think I would divide with him?" chuckled Dave Darke, to himself. "Look out, Black Bart! You are a shrewd genius, but I imagine I can be a trifle sharper. It's a dangerous scheme I'm planning, but, if successful, within a month I shall be commander of the Black Brotherhood!"

Highly elated, the villain approached the hut which contained his hapless captive. Pushing open the door, he entered without the least ceremony.

An old lantern hung upon the wall, and its

feeble light partially illuminated the rude interior. The outlaw could distinguish the form of Grace Garland, as she reclined upon the couch of skins.

As the door opened, Grace sprung to her feet and confronted the intruder. Recognizing the cruelly handsome features of the ex-cashier, she shrunk back in dismay.

"Why, good-evening, Miss Garland!" saluted the lieutenant, doffing his hat with mock politeness. "I am surprised to find you here. Is it to see me that you have ventured so far from home?"

Grace Garland took a step forward, her eyes flashing, her breast throbbing with righteous indignation.

"Stop, scoundrel!" she cried. "The very sound of your voice is hateful to me. Why have you come here to torture me with your unwelcome presence? Go, I say!"

The girl's voice rung free and fearless; her frame trembled with passion; her eyes flashed fire.

The outlaw lieutenant fell back a step, surprised at the spirit of his prisoner. Instead of a meek, submissive girl, he found a veritable tigress.

"What a little spitfire you are," he exclaimed; "and so charming! I never saw you look so beautiful, my dear. But, pray, what have I done to merit your dire displeasure?"

"Hold! Perfidious wretch, I know your base scheme, through and through. It is to you that I owe this indignity. It was you who caused me to be taken from home and friends, and brought to this loathsome place. Dave Darke, you are an unprincipled villain!"

The outlaw laughed amusedly.

"You are very complimentary, my dear; I must confess I'm not an angel; yet, please don't rub it on too thick. Yes, Gracie, it was I who had you brought here. You are a regular Yankee at guessing."

"You shall pay dearly for this outrage. Powerful friends will soon come to my rescue. Then, Dave Darke, beware!"

"I'm not at all alarmed by your threats, my pretty angel," said the outlaw, coolly. "In this secluded spot, at the top of Mad Mountain, you are beyond reach of your Richville friends. Only two of them know of your whereabouts; and they are both prisoners in the hands of the Black Brotherhood."

"Two of my friends prisoners?"

"That's what I said. Particular friends, too, I believe. One is the boy, Headlight Harry; the other—Ralph Renwood!"

"Ralph Renwood a prisoner? Merciful Heaven, what will become of me now?"

Overcome by the terrible thought, Grace Garland staggered against the wall. The outlaw watched her exultantly.

"I thought that would take you down a peg, my young vixen," he chuckled. "Your dear friends are close at hand, but in scarcely a fit condition to aid you; so you may as well abandon all hopes of rescue, and resign yourself to the inevitable."

"And what is that, scoundrel?"

"To become my wife. I have long loved you madly, and swore to possess you for my own. Failing to do so by fair means, I was compelled to resort to foul, and the result is, you are now hopelessly in my power. To-morrow we shall be legally married; for we have among our number a regularly-ordained minister of the gospel, who long since forsook the path of the righteous for a more remunerative calling. Doubtless he hasn't forgotten how to tie the knot in proper style."

"Your friends shall be interested witnesses of the ceremony, though I doubt if it affords them much pleasure. Then, when the guests have been sent on their way rejoicing, nothing remains for us but to enjoy a life of ease and pleasure. Safe in our own quiet mountain home. What do you think of the prospect, dear? Is it not delightful?"

"Very nicely planned, but not yet executed," retorted Grace Garland, who had partially recovered her composure, with a wonderful effort.

"Remember it takes two to make a bargain. Before I would become the wife of such a murderous, black-hearted scoundrel, I would take my life with my own hand!"

Dave Darke heard these spirited words with an ominous scowl.

"Sorry you are so obstinate, Miss Spitfire, for it won't do the least particle of good," he exclaimed, confidently. "A woman who should mind, and won't mind, must be made to mind. I'll tame your rebellious spirit, my proud beauty."

"Now, however, I will go, and leave you to

your own reflections for a time. Remember, to-morrow is our wedding day, and I hope you will conclude to be more reasonable. Now, dear, before I leave, give me one sweet little kiss from those warm, ripe lips!"

So saying, the outlaw advanced triumphantly; but Grace Garland sprung back with a startled cry.

Something flashed brightly in the dim light, and a glittering dagger, clutched in the girl's uplifted hand, swiftly descended upon the outlaw's breast!

Desperation nerved the maiden's arm, and she struck swift and straight. Only the superior quickness of the lieutenant saved him from instant death.

Too late to avoid the attack entirely, he managed to catch the descending blow upon his left forearm. Cursing with rage and pain, the ruffian staggered back, blood spurting from an ugly cut.

"Curse you, tigress!" he hissed. "You shall pay dearly for that blow. I'll cut your claws, my vixen!" and so saying the discomfited lieutenant rushed from the hut to dress his wounded arm.

Grace Garland stood for a moment, blankly staring at the retreating form.

Then her overstrained nerves gave way, and she fell upon the floor in a deep swoon, the bloody dagger falling from her nerveless grasp.

CHAPTER XII.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

DURING Dave Darke's unsatisfactory interview with the prisoner, other events, equally as interesting, were transpiring within the outlaw stronghold.

Black Bart had adopted a unique method of securing his two captives—Ralph Renwood and Headlight Harry. As before stated, three sides of the plateau consisted of precipitous cliffs, shooting downward for hundreds of feet; and the captain's quick brain conceived a novel plan, whereby he could keep his prisoners, and at the same time render a guard unnecessary.

The two young men were placed back to back, after which a long, stout rope was produced and passed round and round their united bodies, until they were bound together even more closely than the Siamese twins. Then a short piece was attached, each end, to the cord around their breasts, which, when passed over their heads, formed a loop or yoke. To this was knotted the end of another long rope.

When this contrivance was completed to the satisfaction of Black Bart, that individual ordered the pinioned captives lowered over the brink of the precipice, after which the end of the rope was passed several times around an adjacent stump, and securely made fast.

Satisfied that no man, not possessed of supernatural power, could escape from such a predicament, the bandits prepared for a night's rest, leaving the unfortunate prisoners to their own reflections.

These were, to say the least, unpleasant. Their position was not only novel, but hazardous. There they hung in space, perhaps a dozen feet below the top of the cliff. The suspending rope being attached to the yoke exactly above their heads, served to keep them balanced in an upright position.

Below them yawned a frightful chasm, a plunge into which meant instant death—death from which they were separated only by a single rope! Possible it was that one of the knots might slip; and the thoughts of what would follow such a catastrophe caused the brave fellows to grow faint and sick with horror.

At first they swung with a slow, oscillating motion, but this gradually decreased and left them hanging a dead weight before the face of the cliff.

Nothing but impenetrable darkness above and below; for the sky was overcast, and the low, sullen muttering of distant thunder foretold a coming storm.

Pen cannot adequately describe the feelings that surged tumultuously through the breasts of the prisoners, hanging motionless 'twixt earth and sky, fearful that, any moment, the thread-like support might part, and precipitate them down, down to a horrible death!

But no such catastrophe occurred. Black Bart cared not to lose his prey in that manner; so unusual care and skill had been exercised in preparing the cords. An hour passed slowly away, and yet the ropes held firm.

Powerless to move a muscle, the two friends hung from the cliff without a word. Talk would not improve their situation one iota; nor did either feel in a mood for speech.

"Hist!"

A warning call seemed to come from above. Was it real, or only a fancy? The prisoners strained their ears to listen.

Again the call was sounded, followed by words clear and unmistakable.

"Hist! Below there! Are you asleep?"

This question struck the prisoners as being entirely out of place, inasmuch as such a position could hardly be calculated to bring slumber. It was impossible to look up and see the speaker, but Ralph Renwood cautiously answered the call.

"Who is it?" he inquired.

"A friend!" came the soft response. "Be careful, and don't speak loudly. We may be overheard."

The hopes of the prisoners rose high.

"You are in a bad fix," continued the unknown.

"A fact of which we are very well aware."

"And you wish to escape?"

"The question is entirely unnecessary," answered Ralph, impatiently.

"If I should help you to escape, what would the assistance be worth to you?" demanded the unknown, eagerly.

"Speaking for myself, I can only give you my heartfelt gratitude. However, only put me in a way to escape with the girl in yonder cabin, and I assure you your time and labor will not be spent in vain. Her people will richly reward you."

This reply seemed to satisfy the man above, for an audible chuckle seemed to reach the ears of the engineer.

"Good! I will help you all to escape," came the reply.

"At once?" eagerly demanded Ralph.

"Wait till I see if the coast is clear. Keep up your courage, for I will soon return."

A slight rustling above told the prisoners that their unknown benefactor had retreated. Who could he be? In mingled hope and doubt they anxiously waited.

Ten minutes slowly passed, and then the low voice of the unknown was once more heard.

"All is well. The bandits are soundly sleeping. However, there's no time to lose, for they may awaken at any moment."

"Please make haste," urged Ralph Renwood, impatiently. "How are you going to get us up? We are unable to help ourselves a particle, and I doubt your ability to raise our united weights."

"Courage, señor! Wait and see," assured the rescuer, who immediately went to work with a will.

To raise the two prisoners, hanging a dead weight upon the rope was a herculean task, and the man above panted and grunted laboriously, as he brought every nerve and sinew to bear upon the tense cord. But he was a powerful fellow, and slowly raised the captives, inch by inch.

When sufficient slack had been obtained, he passed the rope around the stump, thus being enabled to pause and rest without losing any advantage.

In this manner the work of liberation went on, very slowly and laboriously, for the unknown was compelled frequently to stop and rest. Fully an hour had elapsed when at length the heads of the impatient prisoners appeared above the edge of the cliff. Another long, strong pull, and they lay like a log upon the grassy sward. A keen-edged knife, in the clever hand of the rescuer, soon severed the manifold bonds, and the railroad-men bounded eagerly to their feet, free once more.

Curiously they regarded their benefactor, whose gigantic form was barely visible in the darkness.

"Tell me, my friend, to whom are we indebted for this unexpected assistance?" inquired Ralph Renwood.

"Call me Gaspard—a member of the Black Brotherhood, as you would no doubt know if you could see my face."

"A member of the Brotherhood! Then why have you aided us?"

"Purely from selfish motives, and not from any love I bear for you," explained the Mexican, with refreshing candor. "Hatred for Dave Darke, who has usurped my authority, has caused me to adopt this method of getting square with him. What could be better than to rob him of his prospective bride?"

"And what will become of you, when your work becomes known to the Brotherhood? They will pursue and kill you."

Gaspard snapped his fingers contemptuously. "Bah! I'm willing to take the chances. I intend to take the money you promised me, and flee far out of reach of the Black Brotherhood."

In my sunny Southern home, I can laugh at Dave Darke's discomfiture."

"Well, Gaspard, outlaw though you are, you are doing us a good turn to-night; and I pledge you my word it shall not be passed by unrewarded," declared the engineer. "Now let us make haste, for these fellows may awaken at any moment."

"Right, señor. Every moment is precious," assented the bandit traitor, glancing nervously about.

"The first thing necessary is to find the captive girl," went on Ralph Renwood, hurriedly.

"Do you know where she is confined?"

"Si, señor!"

"Is she guarded?"

"Not at present. I was appointed sentinel; and you can see how faithfully I am serving," answered the renegade, with a smile that bared his gleaming teeth.

"Then lead on."

Without further words, the trio crept stealthily across the clearing. Silence, deep and unbroken, brooded over the mountain stronghold, the occupants of which were apparently wrapped in slumber. Nothing occurred to interrupt their progress, as Gaspard led the way straight to the door of Grace Garland's prison.

"I will enter alone. Wait for me outside," commanded Renwood; and, carefully pushing open the door, he peered anxiously within the room.

Happily the captive was awake, and instantly recognized her lover.

"Ralph!"

"Grace!"

Fairly sobbing with joy, the fair girl threw herself into his eager arms.

"Oh, Ralph, how came you here? They told me you were a prisoner."

"Hush, darling! This is no time for explanations. Come with me without a word, for the slightest sound may betray us."

Clasping the frail form in his loving arms, Ralph Renwood hastened from the cabin, to where his companions were impatiently waiting.

At this moment the storm, so long brewing, burst in all its fury. The rain descended in broad, driving sheets; thunder rolled and crashed with frightful reverberations, and vivid lightning flashed, zigzag, through the murky skies. The very mountain-top seemed to tremble before the awful gale!

Appalled at the violence of the storm, the fugitives paused for an instant, irresolute. However, fear of recapture urged them to brave the dangers of the tempest.

Still, not a sound was heard from the outlaw band, as the little party crept stealthily across the open space. Reaching the path, they pressed resolutely down the mountain-side.

Gaspard, the ex-lieutenant, led the way, frequently casting uneasy glances back, for the deserter dreaded the wrath of the Brotherhood, when they discovered his treachery. Close behind followed the engineer, bearing Grace Garland in his arms, while Headlight Harry brought up the rear.

The roar of the tempest was deafening. Giant trees fell crashing on every hand, filling the air with dying debris; but the fugitives pressed on, undaunted.

"Halt, there!"

Above the bellow of the blast rung out the stern command, and as the fugitives paused, dismayed, a vivid flash lit up the scene, revealing the somber forms of Black Bart's Brotherhood, drawn up across the trail!

Our friends were trapped!

CHAPTER XIII.

A TRAITOR'S DOOM.

DUMFOUNDED, the luckless refugees stared at the Black Brotherhood, whom they had fondly hoped were sound asleep at the stronghold above—stared in blank amazement, scarcely able to credit their senses!

Flight was impossible, for the outlaws surrounded them completely. They could only struggle with a desperation born of despair, as their formidable foes swooped down upon them like a pack of wolves.

Gaspard, the bandit traitor, was the only one of the fugitives who possessed weapons; and the gang pounced onto him before he had a chance to use them. Fighting furiously, he was borne to the earth and pinioned by a dozen sinewy arms. Ralph Renwood, too, hampered by the maiden in his arms, was knocked down and secured, ere he could strike a blow in defense.

Headlight Harry, however, was more fortunate than his companions. The railroad-boy

made a prompt and daring break for liberty, and with marvelous success. Writhing like an eel, he slipped through the cordon of outlaws, artfully evading the many hands outstretched to seize him, and darted into the thicket.

Several of the Brotherhood quickly dashed in pursuit, while the remainder at once returned to camp with their crestfallen prisoners.

Ralph Renwood was in despair.

Frustrated at the moment when escape seemed certain, it seemed, indeed, that fate had set her hand against the ill-starred prisoners. However, nothing remained but to make the best of the situation.

Reaching the camp, Grace and Ralph were both thrown into the hut which had before served as Grace Garland's prison. Both were bound hand and foot, and securely guarded. Evidently the outlaws did not care to be bothered by another attempted escape.

The remaining captive was taken to Black Bart's own cabin, a commodious structure, capable of admitting the entire Brotherhood. Here the band congregated, at the command of their chief.

Gaspard was placed in the center of the room, securely bound. The wretch fully realized the enormity of his offense, and sat in moody silence at the feet of the outlaw captain, meeting with stoical indifference the fierce, vindictive glances of his whilom comrades, who gathered around in an eager, expectant group.

Torches thrust into the wall cast a weird light upon the scene as Black Bart stepped forward and addressed his followers:

"Men, you are called together to pass judgment upon a traitor. For the first time in our history a member of the Brotherhood has proved false to his oath of allegiance. Here lies the guilty wretch—Gaspard, the traitor; a man whom we took into our band in the hour of adversity and protected like a brother. Trusted with all our secrets, promoted from the general ranks—yet, this is the way in which he pays his debt of gratitude! With your own eyes you have seen the prisoner leaving the camp in company with our three captives. The reason for this treachery Lieutenant Darke will explain to you."

Dave Darke now stepped forward, his injured arm bandaged and a look upon his face blacker than a thunder-cloud. He briefly told how, unable to sleep from the pain caused by his wound, he had wandered aimlessly about the camp, and chancing upon the spot, unawares, had overheard every word of the conversation between Gaspard and the prisoners. He hastened to apprise Black Bart of the danger, and a trap was quickly laid for the unsuspecting fugitives, with the result already known.

"There's not the slightest doubt of Gaspard's guilt," exclaimed Black Bart, when his crafty lieutenant had finished. "Our own eyes and ears cannot deceive us. Boys, what is the penalty prescribed for disloyalty to the Black Brotherhood?"

"Death!"

In a deep, solemn chorus came the answer from the lips of the outlaws, falling like a funeral-knell upon the ears of the wretched traitor.

"Yes, death," iterated the captain, sternly. "As to the mode of destruction, it remains for me to decide. It is well! I have already thought of a novel and effectual way to usher our genial Gaspard into the happy land."

Black Bart immediately issued his instructions, which the Brotherhood hastened to obey. It was determined to dispose of the traitor without delay; and soon the entire party, excepting a few men left to guard the prisoners, left the mountain-top and proceeded down the secret trail. In their midst was borne Gaspard, sullen and silent, while Black Bart and Dave Darke accompanied the party.

Not a word was spoken as the Black Brotherhood proceeded on their mission of death. Reaching the bank of the creek, the long boat was launched and freighted and progress hurriedly resumed. Long, powerful strokes propelled the craft down-stream, and soon the party arrived at the railroad bridge. Disembarking, they climbed the embankment and paused beside the track.

Two men now produced shovels and commenced to dig a hole in the space between two sleepers. Industrious they delved, while their comrades looked complacently on, until the hole had reached the depth of about five feet.

Into this, a living grave, the luckless traitor was placed in an upright position, after which the displaced earth was thrown loosely in around him. When these arrangements were completed nothing could be seen of Gaspard save his head and neck.

Black Bart viewed the proceedings impatiently.

"Make haste, boys!" he urged. "The Night Express is due."

Even as he spoke the shrill whistle of an approaching locomotive fell upon their ears.

With blanched face and trembling lips, the doomed traitor heard the ominous sound; realized his imminent peril—knew that in a brief space, a cruel blow from the rushing iron horse would sever his head from his body!

Until now, the Mexican, with wonderful fortitude, had borne the ordeal calmly and silently; but when death stared him fairly in the face, his bull-dog courage vanished, and he begged piteously for mercy.

In vain! As well might he have appealed to the very rocks around. Stern and unrelenting, the Black Brotherhood stood grimly beside the track, eager for the consummation of their vengeance.

"Mercy!" laughed Black Bart, heartlessly, in response to the victim's piteous appeal. "Such mercy as you would have shown us, had you escaped. You would have betrayed our secret camp, and brought the minions of the law upon us; and yet you dare ask for mercy! Ha, ha! You ask in vain! Die, treacherous dog, as a traitor should!"

Black Bart coldly turned away, just as the gleaming headlight of the approaching train flashed brightly round a curve.

Facing the train, Gaspard could see the flaming eye as it bore down upon him like a meteor. Wildly he shrieked for help, but the combined sounds of the train and tempest drowned his feeble cries.

It was a fearful scene! The whirling, snorting, fire-breathing engine, plunging madly over the echoing rails; the doomed outlaw, shrieking for mercy; the compassionless Brotherhood, standing like statues in the drenching rain, while the lightning flashed and the thunder rolled in the murky heavens—all went to form a picture weird and hideous to look upon.

Down the steep grade flashed the Night Express, as it eager to destroy the luckless human in its resistless course. Suddenly Gaspard's head was seen to droop. An all-merciful power had bereft him of his senses, and spared him the consciousness of the awful end.

Nearer, nearer grew the iron horse, till, with a hideous scream, it flashed upon the fatal spot. For an instant the gleaming headlight revealed the sickening spectacle of a blood-dripping human head flying through the air! Then the train vanished in the distance, and over the scene reigned a silence broken only by the muttering of the storm.

The Black Brotherhood were avenged.

CHAPTER XIV.

DOWN TO DEATH.

AWAY through the tangled thicket, like a startled fawn, sped Headlight Harry, when good luck and prompt action enabled him to escape the clutches of the Black Brotherhood.

The crashing of heavy feet through the dense undergrowth, warned him that he was hotly pursued; however, the intrepid railroad-boy felt equal to the occasion. Wary as a fox, he turned, twisted and doubled, in the effort to throw his enemies off the scent.

Aided by the impenetrable darkness, Harry was eminently successful; for soon all sounds of his pursuers ceased, and the lad felt assured that the outlaws had abandoned the chase in disgust.

Satisfied that there was no immediate danger, the youth paused to regain his breath, and consider the situation.

Many boys, after such a series of thrilling adventures, would have instantly sought a place of safety, thankful to escape with their lives; but Headlight Harry was not constructed upon these selfish principles.

He had no intention of abandoning his less fortunate friends to their fate, without one more supreme effort in their behalf. So, after a brief rest, the courageous lad again commenced to ascend the mountain-side.

Proceeding with the utmost caution, he soon reached the edge of the outlaws' stronghold, just in time to witness the departure therefrom of the Black Brotherhood, including Black Bart, Dave Darke and the unfortunate traitor, Gaspard. The presence of the latter told Harry the meaning of this midnight procession, and the youth could not resist a feeling of pity for the doomed bandit.

"I wouldn't give a straw for that galoot's chances; but, all the same, what's his loss is my gain. Ralph and Grace are unquestionably here in the camp, and, judging from the size

of yonder turn-out, there can't be more than two or three men left to guard them. Jingol! I got here jest in time."

Thus reasoned the railroad-boy, as he crouched in the bushes, and eagerly watched the movements of the departing outlaws. Waiting only until the party had passed out of sight and hearing, he stole stealthily out into the clearing.

It was still dark, yet a lightning-flash might betray him; so it was with the utmost care that he crept from point to point. Not a sign of life was to be seen—not a sound heard save the steadily down-pouring rain; but the keen eye of the spy soon perceived a tiny light gleaming through a chink in the wall of an adjacent cabin.

Stealthily approaching, Headlight Harry peered eagerly through the interstice into the interior of the hut. His curiosity was rewarded; for a glance told him that this particular shanty held the only remaining occupants of the stronghold.

Grace Garland and the young engineer lay in one corner, both securely bound, while near the door sat their guards—two burly ruffians, who squatted leisurely upon the floor, secure from the storm without, and coolly manipulated a greasy pack of cards, apparently oblivious of all else around them.

Such was the scene upon which the daringspy looked eagerly. Anxious to rescue his friends, yet the railroad-boy hesitated. Two stalwart bandits, armed to the teeth, stood between him and the accomplishment of his purpose; and he was but a mere lad, alone and unarmed.

But Headlight Harry realized the danger of delay, and acted upon the first idea that occurred to his fertile brain. Gaining a position in front of the closed door of the hut, the daring youth dashed forward with the yell of a Comanche brave. Like an avalanche, he rushed against the door, which was rudely hung and swung inward.

The outlaws were sitting close to the door, which yielded before the spy's impetuous rush, and swung against the fellows' backs with a force that sent them sprawling upon the floor.

This was exactly what Harry had anticipated. The very audacity of his trick insured success.

One of the outlaws lay like a log where he fell; he had struck his head against the wall, and the blow bereft him of his senses.

Quick as a flash, Headlight Harry snatched a revolver from the belt of the prostrate sentinel, and turned it upon the other ruffian, who was just scrambling to his feet.

Bang! The weapon exploded with a report that sounded like a cannon in the narrow confines of the room; but the ball missed its mark, and the outlaw dashed madly out into the darkness, with the triumphant railroad-boy close at his heels.

In his terror, the bandit ran straight toward the precipice; nor did he discover his mistake until it was too late. One long, agonized screech arose, as the luckless wretch fell over the giddy brink, and plunged madly down to death. Then all was still.

With a shudder, Headlight Harry retraced his way to the cabin. To liberate his surprised and delighted friends was but the work of a moment.

No time was lost in leaving the stronghold. Fearful lest the absent Brotherhood should return in time to cut off their retreat, the fugitives pressed hurriedly down the mountain-path. As they neared the water, a warning exclamation from Headlight Harry, who was in advance, brought them to a halt.

The outlaws were returning. Our friends could hear the sound of the boat's keel, as it grated upon the sandy shore. Leaving the path, the fugitives crouched in the thicket, fairly holding their breath in suspense, as the bandits came up from the creek, and filed leisurely past within arm's-length.

When the last man had receded from view, the trio emerged from their concealment and hurried down to the shore. The boat was speedily launched; Grace was assisted to a seat; then the young fellows took their places, and the voyage began.

Scarcely had they rowed a hundred yards, when a chorus of fierce shouts from the direction of the outlaw camp, warned them that their escape had been discovered.

The unwelcome sound inspired the oarsmen with renewed strength. Madly they plied the oars, for, indeed, their lives depended upon their efforts. The light craft shot over the water like an arrow.

Well they knew that escape was by no means certain. The Black Brotherhood were in swift

pursuit, with a good prospect of overtaking the fugitives, when the end of the water route was reached; for then, hampered as they were by the helpless girl, rapid flight was impossible. Under cover of darkness, it would have been a comparatively easy matter to evade their pursuers; but now the night was spent, and day was quickly dawning. The thunder and lightning had ceased, but the rain still poured in a steady stream, with no prospect of abatement.

"I've got an idea!" panted Headlight Harry, as he plied his oar like a veteran. "You know there's a car-house 'bout half a mile above the bridge; an' unless the outlaws have plundered it, there's a bran-new hand-car waitin' there for us. If we kin get the car ahead of them, why the rest'll be easy. We kin ride home in state, and thumb our noses at Black Bart's Brotherhood!"

"You're right, Harry! I never thought of that," agreed Ralph Renwood, enthusiastically. "Row for your life, Harry! We'll outwit the demons yet!"

Their superhuman efforts soon brought the boat to the bridge. The young engineer, clasping Grace Garland in his arms, scrambled up the bank and sped up the track at the top of his speed, while Headlight Harry bounded lightly on before.

As they fled, the distant splash of paddles reached their ears, telling that the outlaws had procured another boat and were racing downstream in hot pursuit.

Along the line sped the fugitives, until at last the longed-for goal was in sight. The car-house was one of various structures placed at intervals along the road, and containing a hand-car and numerous tools and implements for the use of the section-men.

The door of the house was fastened, but Ralph possessed a key that would fit the lock, and the contents of the building were quickly at their disposal. Luckily, the car was there unharmed, and the youths lost no time in placing it upon the track.

The belt was adjusted, while Grace seated herself upon the platform; then Ralph and Harry took their places, and the machine moved slowly over the glittering rails, just as the pursuing outlaws dashed into view, shouting vociferously.

A defiant shout answered them, as the fugitives bent every energy to the task, and the car flew faster and faster, gaining fresh impetus at every revolution of the whirling cranks.

Not daring to fire lest they should hit the girl, Black Bart's men had no alternative but to abandon the chase, and a turn of the road soon hid the car and its occupants from the discomfited outlaws' sight.

When a safe distance had been placed between them and their foes, the engineer and his companion ceased turning and sought a much-needed rest from their terrible exertions. It is needless to say that the fugitives were jubilant over their marvelous escape. They were now on the way to Richville, and a ride of but a few miles would land them safe at home.

At least, so they expected; but subsequent events proved that the wild adventure was not yet ended.

Leisurely propelling the hand-car, the party had placed about three miles between them and the spot where they had left the outlaws, when suddenly the practiced ear of the engineer caught a familiar sound.

"There's a train behind us, coming like the wind," he announced, excitedly. "What can it mean?"

"There's no train due," declared the well-posted railroad-boy, emphatically. "The nearest due is the Eastern Freight, an' I reckon we're 'most half an hour ahead of her time."

"Certainly we are. I don't understand why they are so much ahead of time. Can it be possible that—"

The engineer's interrogation remained unfinished, for just then a locomotive tore swiftly round a curve. The track at this point was nearly straight for a considerable distance, so when the "wildcat" engine rushed into sight the hand-car was fully a quarter of a mile away.

In spite of the distance, Headlight Harry's keen eyes immediately recognized the tall form at the engineer's post. It was Black Bart, Chief of the Mountain Brotherhood!

The cab and tender swarmed with the members of that lawless band.

A single glance convinced the fugitives of the truth. Black Bart, with devilish cunning, had stopped and captured the freight train, cut loose the engine and started in chase of the run aways.

For a moment the two young fellows stood as if petrified, so unexpected was the sight of the bandits.

Then they threw themselves upon the crank-handles and sent the car flying down the line. Round went their arms like lightning, while the wheels of the machine hummed merrily along the glistening rails.

But of what avail was human muscle against the power of steam?

The snorting, leaping iron horse bore down upon them like the wind. A hasty glance behind showed the jubilant outlaws scarcely a hundred rods away. Five minutes more would find them run down and annihilated if they maintained their present position. The only chance was to abandon the car and continue the flight on foot before the pursuers could check their mad career.

At this instant the car whirled round a sharp curve.

"Look!" yelled Headlight Harry, as he pointed ahead.

Not fifty feet away the line crossed Mad River over a lofty trestle-bridge. Swollen by the rain, the voluminous waters surged madly against the frail supports, threatening to sweep the entire structure from its path.

Even as they looked the dismayed fugitives beheld the bridge shake violently as if about to give away.

There was no time to avoid this new danger. Before a hand could move the car had flashed upon the trestle.

An instant of fearful suspense, and the machine had crossed the bridge and was safe upon the solid track beyond.

But even at this moment the trestle shook and tottered, and with a terrific crash yielded to the mighty power of Mad River, leaving a watery chasm yawning between pursuer and pursued.

Amazed, the fugitives looked, thankful for their own escape. But the climax was yet to come!

"Look—look!" yelled Headlight Harry. "The engine—it will go into the river!"

Flashing round the curve like a meteor, the outlaw-freighted locomotive rushed toward the fatal spot.

Black Bart saw the danger and swiftly reversed the engine; but the movement came too late. The distance was too short, and the doomed machine approached the gulf with unabated velocity.

"God be merciful to the wretches! Nothing can save them now!" gasped Ralph Renwood, glaring at the fearful scene as if fascinated.

Petrified with horror, the occupants of the engine could make no effort to save themselves. In a twinkling they reached the verge of the chasm, the huge machine shot far out into the air, and then, hissing and throbbing, went down, down into the awful depths.

As the locomotive struck the water, her over-charged boiler exploded with a thunderous sound, sending showers of water and debris high into the air.

Awed at the terrible catastrophe, the two men on the car backed slowly to the edge of the gulf.

It was a fearful scene they looked down upon! An angry waste of swirling, white-wreathed waters, the surface of which was strewn with broken timbers and fragments of the shattered engine. Here and there, an arm, a leg, or other fragments of a human body, were tossed upon the turbulent tide!

Not a soul had survived! Those who escaped the explosion, only met death upon the rocks or in the cruel waters. The annihilation was complete.

Two objects in particular attracted the attention of the horrified spectators. They were unmistakably the bodies of Black Bart and his crafty subaltern, Dave Darke. Their white, ghastly faces upturned to the sky, the death-stricken outlaws floated lightly down the stream, their arms closely entwined, where they had clutched each other in a last grip of despair.

Awed and fascinated, Ralph Renwood and Headlight Harry gazed silently upon the ghastly scene; watched the swirling waters of Mad River as they rushed exultantly on their way, bearing upon their foam-flecked bosom all that remained of Black Bart's Brotherhood!

Two hours later, the good people of Richville were electrified at the arrival of a dilapidated hand-car, bearing the three persons whose prolonged absence had created such a commotion.

Explanations were at once in order, and Ralph and Harry, for the second time within four days, were lionized on every hand. No-

thing was too good for them—in fact, they "owned the town," but the gallant fellows bore their honors with becoming modesty.

Millionaire Garland, the pompous father of pretty Grace, was beside himself with delight, and lost no time in informing the young engineer that a higher position awaited his acceptance. Nor did his enthusiasm abate one iota, when the emboldened youth ventured to ask the hand of his lovely daughter. The old gentleman promptly allowed that Ralph Renwood would make a very satisfactory son-in-law.

So there was a merry wedding, by-and-by; and it may be said that neither of the parties more particularly concerned has had occasion to regret it.

Ralph Renwood rose rapidly, and is now superintendent of the road, over which he once run as a common engineer. Under his able management, the company prospers.

Harry Hilton has now grown to man's estate, but he is the same rollicking, adventurous "railroader." Offered a chance of various positions, he still sticks to his old love, for engineering has not yet lost its charms for him. Every day he may be seen at his post upon the reliable "Atalanta," the same dashing, intrepid spirit of old, and the "boys" still call him HEADLIGHT HARRY.

THE END.

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